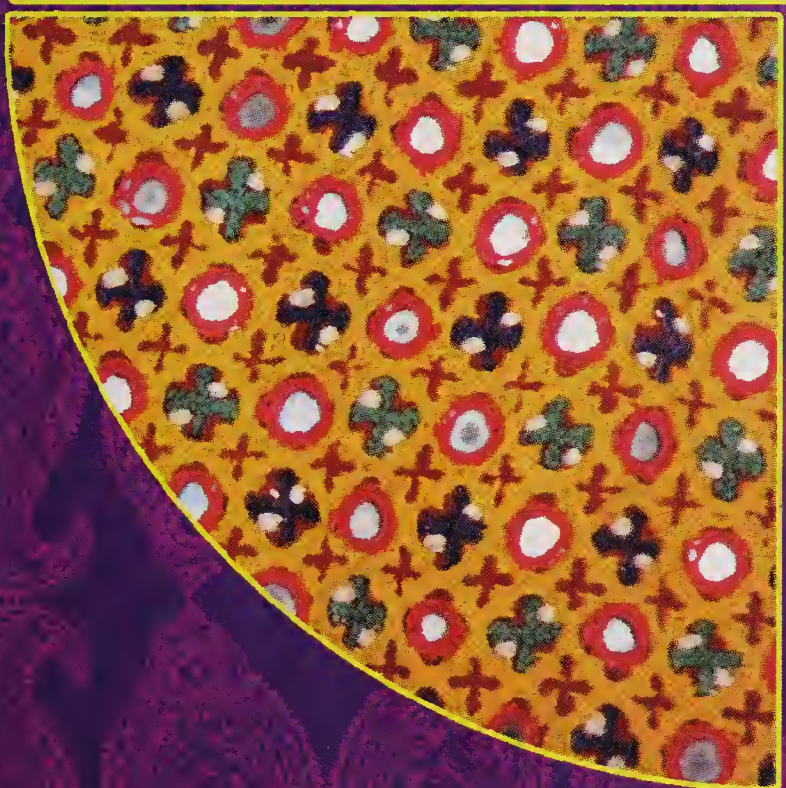
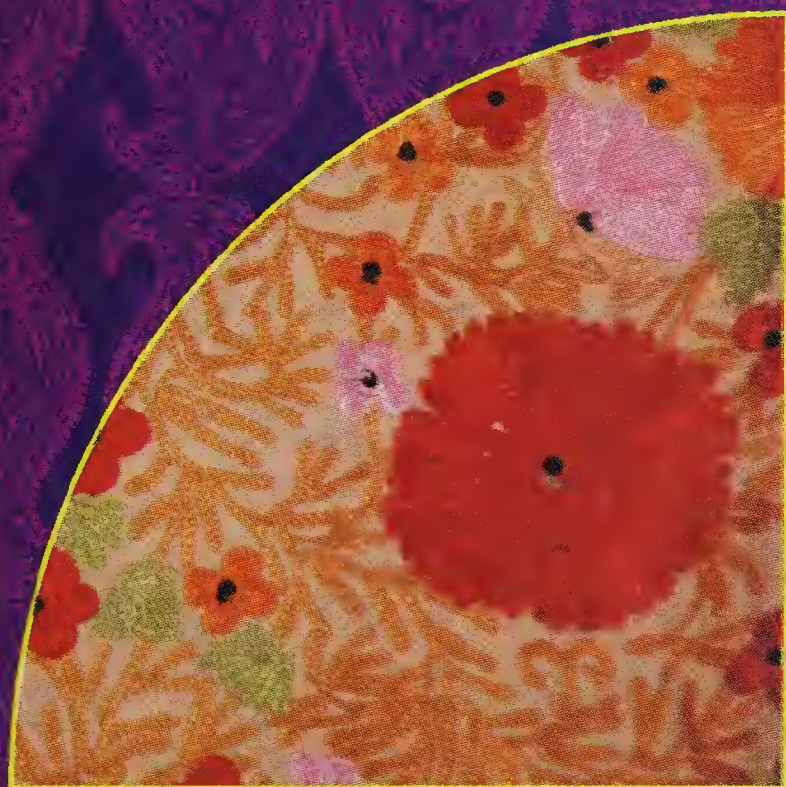




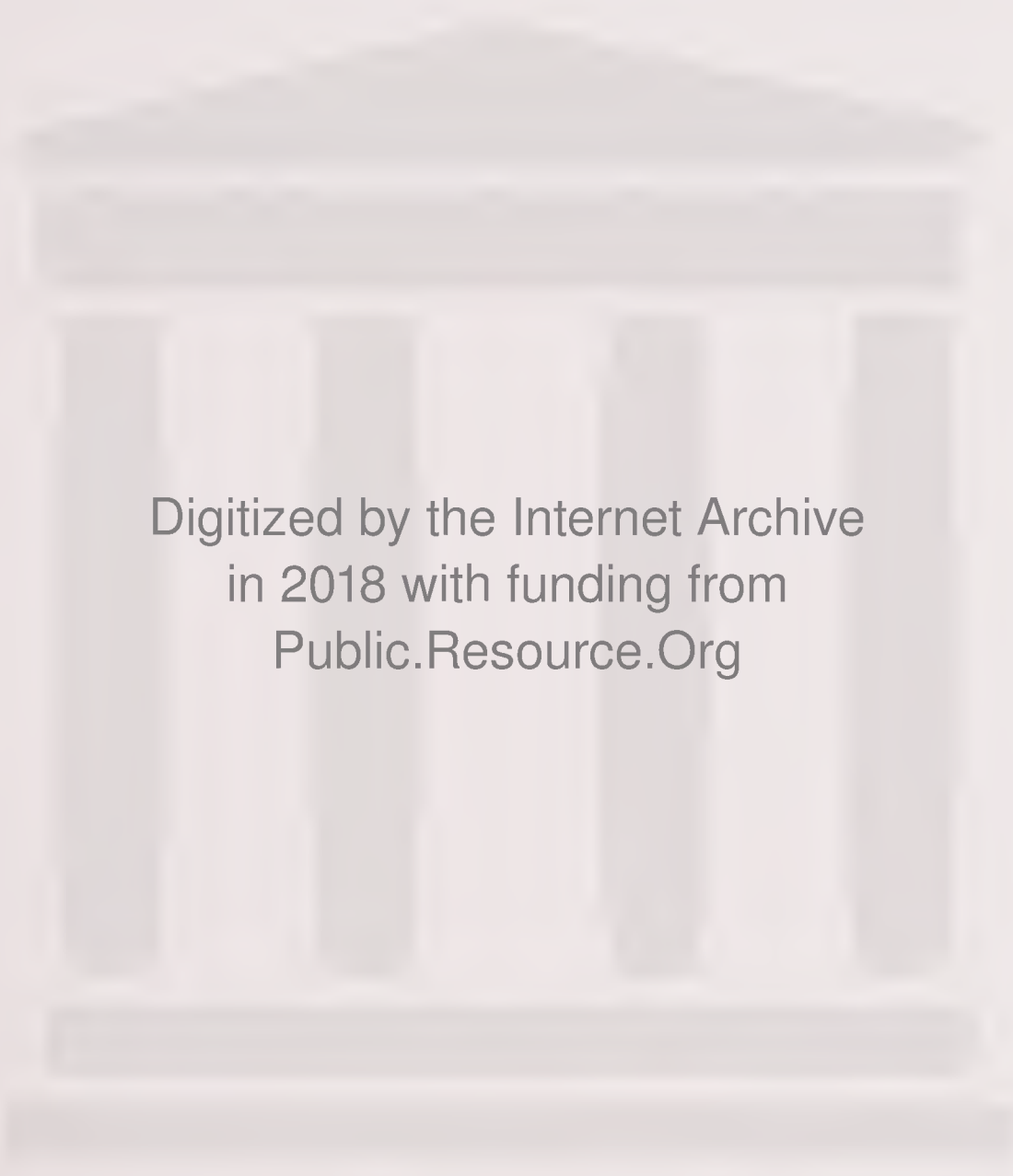
# Indian Embroidery



JAMILA BRIJBHUSHAN







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# **Indian Embroidery**



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**Jamila Brijbhushan**



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# I

## THE ART OF EMBROIDERY

Embroidery, that is the embellishment of cloth with design made by needle and thread, is an art that stretches back to hoary antiquity. The word 'embroidery' is a Middle English word derived from the old French 'broder' meaning edge or border. Egyptian mummies were wrapped in garments embroidered in gold and robes of kings and noblemen were embellished with embroidered designs as were the trappings of their chariots. The design was made with threads of linen and wool, the hair of goats and camel and exceedingly fine strips of gold and silver.

According to the Bible, Moses covered the Holy of Holies with a veil 'of fine linen embroidered with cherubim of blue, purple and scarlet. The temple built by Solomon in Jerusalem was adorned with an embroidered curtain. Long before the advent of the Christian era Babylon, Persia and Sidon had achieved great perfection in the art of embroidery. Alexander was dazzled by the specimens of Persian embroidery brought to his notice. China and India also had developed the art from early times.

Over the centuries, embroidery has been used to adorn everything from the smallest personal possession like handkerchiefs and underwear to the most sumptuous state regalia. Curtains, cushions, wall hangings, state robes, throne canopies and seats, ordinary everyday clothes, bed and table linen have all provided gist to the embroiderer's mill. The adornment is done on all kinds of pliable material which can be pierced with a needle—linen, cotton, wool, silk and leather.

Gold, silver, silk, cotton and wool threads, animal hair, precious stones, pearls, shells, insects' wings, seeds and enamel are all used to produce effects of ravishing simplicity or awesome grandeur. The precious material was never lost for whenever the base fabric was worn out and the garment or decorative piece could no longer be used for its original purpose, the gold and silver threads and precious stones were extracted and sold. This has always been a common practice in India which also existed in Europe until the last century. In the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars English ladies melted down the metal in the gold embroidery of uniforms, to raise money to meet necessary expenses.

Fragments of embroidered cloth dating from early times have been found in Europe and Asia. Pieces of tapestry of leather and felt excavated from burial mounds in the Altai Mountains dating from the 4th century B. C. show amazing dexterity in the art of applique. Seven different kinds of cloth are used to depict a horse, rider and a griffin. The work done with horsehair using very fine needles has a strong folk element and is startlingly alive. A fragment of embroidery from the Sassanian dynasty of Persia in the 6th century shows men with details of jewellery and clothes along with trees. Another obviously of a garden, dating from the 4th or 5th century A.D. originating probably from some Eastern Mediterranean country, is decorated with rows of amazingly natural looking trees.

The European climate called for wall hangings and curtains to warm interiors and keep out draughts. High born ladies spent all their leisure hours embroidering massive tapestries with scenes of religious and historical happenings. The Battle of Hastings which brought the Normans to England and is the start of the historical period of English history is depicted in the huge Bayeux tapestry. Bed hangings and table covers were other items on which the ladies exercised their skill as were items such as chalice veils and altar clothes used in churches.

Ecclesiastical robes, celebrating the pomp and grandeur



of the church, vied with royal robes in splendour. They were embroidered with silk and gold and silver threads showing various incidents from the Bible or recounting the history of a particular saint. The cloak said to have been worn by the Emperor Charlemagne at his coronation, dates from 1200 A.D. and carries a stylised representation of the Imperial eagle. The insignia of the Holy Roman Empire consisting of items worn by the Emperor was embroidered with gold and silver thread and pearls.

Gloves, dresses, cushions, curtains, vests, gentlemen's suits, fire screens, christening dresses and shawls, chairs, handbags, hunting pouches, shoes, sashes, pillow covers were all embroidered. The Victorian lady prided herself on the number of embroidered antimacassars, table covers, etc., that filled her house as had her counterpart four or five centuries earlier on the minute and elaborate work of her tapestries which teemed with horses, dogs, men, trees, flowers and legendary birds and animals.

A group of pictures from 14th century China done with infinitely fine stitches could easily be mistaken for paintings, so life like are the expression, so natural the stance and background and so smooth the surface. How old the tradition of embroidery is in China no one can say— some authorities assert that the art originated there— but the Chinese also embellished articles of everyday use as well as ceremonial regalia with the needle. Their skill with the needle has few parallels anywhere in the world. No girl was considered accomplished until she achieved proficiency in the art.

Needles have been found at all excavation sites in India dating from the third millenium B. C. Figurines found at both Harappa and Mohenjodaro are clad in embroidered garments. The sculptures of Bharhut and Sanchi, dating from the 2nd and 1st centuries B.C., show figures wearing embroidered veils and headbands. In Ajanta, figures are also shown wearing garments embellished with designs. While it is not possible to

say with certainty whether these were obtained by embroidery or printing it can be presumed that, in view of the widespread knowledge of the art of plying the needle, some of them must have been produced through that medium. In the 13th century Marco Polo, the Venetian traveller who visited India on his way back from China wrote of the leather mats of Gujarat as being 'of red leather depicting birds and beasts in gold and silver thread sewn very subtly.' He saw couches and cushions made in the same way and considered them more skilfully embroidered than anywhere in the world.

Literature also confirms the use of needles. An invocation in the Taithriya Samhita runs "I invoke with a fine eulogy *Raka* (full moon) who can be easily called. May she, who is auspicious (or good looking) hear (our invocation) and understand in her heart (its meaning): "May she sew her work with a needle that is unbreakable; may she bestow on us a son that is worthy and would possess immense wealth." A Rigveda hymn says, "With never breaking needle may she sew her work and give her a son most wealthy." Strabo, the Greek geographer, who based his account of India on the diaries of Megasthenes, ambassador to the court of Chandragupta Maurya in the 4th century B. C., describes Indians as dressed in robes worked in gold and richly flowered muslin.

Unfortunately, no specimens of this early embroidery exists. After the 16th century, however, we find a profusion of embroidery of various kinds. A great many of these are preserved in the Calico Mills Museum at Ahmedabad and are found in other parts of the world.

Gujarat was renowned for its silk embroidery on cotton. This was done in very fine chain stitch and, according to Barbosa, who wrote in 1518 about the products of Cambay, the most important port of Gujarat, the art seems to have been used to produce 'very beautiful quilts and testers of bed finely worked.' These quilts were carried to Europe by the Portuguese and enjoyed great popularity. Merchants of the East India



Company were anxious to export these items to England where they fetched high prices. Patan, the historical capital of Northern Gujarat was an important source for such goods and in 1631 King Charles I, by a royal proclamation permitted quilts of Pitania embroidered with silk to be brought to England by servants of the Company as articles of private trade. A large embroidered bedspread in Hardwick Hall in Derbyshire, England, would seem to be one of the earliest specimens of this trade which was described by a writer as being worked in many coloured silks on a cotton ground.

During his visit to the African country, Melinde, in 1502 Vasco da Gama was given a white embroidered bed canopy said to have been made in Bengal. He regarded it as the finest bed canopy he had ever seen. This was high praise indeed for all beds of the rich and reasonably rich in Europe which were decorated with such canopies to protect the sleeper from the cold and all were embroidered to a greater or lesser extent. Apparently the white silk embroidery of Bengal, done presumably with twisted thread, was highly valued. When the Portuguese King, Sebastian, was killed in a battle in Morocco in 1578, the enemy was rewarded with rich gifts for handing over his body. These included a white Indian bedspread of Bengal quilted all over and worked with very fine white silk thread, fringed with yellow silk thread and with tassels.

Embroidery was, obviously, given as much importance by the Mughals as other arts. The Mughal emperors, being great aesthetes naturally took pride in their appearance and paid attention to their clothes. The *Ain-i-Akbari* describes Akbar's wardrobe and states, "His Majesty pays much attention to various stuffs; hence Iranian (Persian) and European and Mongolian articles of wear are in abundance. Skilful masters and workmen have settled in this country to teach the people an improved system of manufacture. The imperial workshops in the towns of Lahore, Agra, Fatehpur, Ahmedabad, Gujarat turn out many masterpieces of workmanship and the figures and patterns, knots and variety of fashions which now prevail,

astonish experienced travellers. His Majesty has himself acquired in a short time a theoretical and practical knowledge of the whole trade; and on account of the care bestowed upon them, the intelligent workmen of this country soon improved .... and the imperial workshops furnish all those stuffs which are made in other countries....” In 1663 Francois Bernier, the French traveller, visited the court of Aurangzeb and described the imperial workshops, “There are besides some large halls which are the ‘kar-kanays’ (karkhanas), that is to say the places where the craftsmen work. In one of these halls you see the embroiderers occupied in their work with the master who supervises them. In another you see the goldsmiths; in yet another the painters” Although Aurangzeb had the makings of an ascetic and lived simply and frugally, he realised the value of pomp and pageantry on State occasions. However, his age saw the beginning of the decline of the empire and the craftsmen working for the imperial court, lacking patronage, soon dispersed to other parts of the country to seek new patrons and to blend their own skills with those existing locally.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, Gujarat was an internationally famous centre for embroidery. It was the silk chain stitch embroidery on cotton which won renown at this time.

Embroidery, like other arts, reflects the cultural traditions of the people. In India the peacock, lotus, the elephant and, above all, the mango have provided inspiration to artists for centuries. The mango (*kairi*) is an overwhelming favourite and variations of the design are found in different parts of the country under names associated with more or less similar shapes e.g. the windblown cypress in Kashmir and the cashewnut (*godambi*) in the South Kashmiri embroidery shows the pastel shades and shapes of its flora—the iris, the lily, the saffron flower and the chinara leaf which appears repeatedly in all art forms of the valley. Rajasthan and large parts of the South favour the tulsi plant, gateways and arches of temples and shrines, the lotus, peacock, figures of deities, horses, elephants, bullocks,



birds and mythological animals. North India shows motifs which are Indo-Persian in origin.

The embroiderer plied his needle not only to adorn garments of personal wear—usually of the finest cotton to keep the heat at bay—but to shawls, carpets, wall hangings, roofs of tents, trappings of horses and elephants and bullocks, tray and book covers and a host of other items.

Commercial embroidery is a highly specialised art and is based on division of labour. The design is stamped on the cloth by the *chapgar*, the printer. This is done with wood blocks having the design carved in relief on one side. The dye is made from red earth mixed with gum mucilage. The embroiderer's effort is to cover the design fully with stitches but if any part of it shows after the completion of the work it can easily be removed by washing. Sometimes the figures are drawn by painters in pencil on muslin and in chalk on wool. The cloth is stretched on a horizontal frame raised sufficiently from the ground to make it possible for the embroiderer to work comfortably without having to bend too far forward (needless to say, the embroiderer always sits on the floor). The needle is always pushed away from the person plying it and never towards him. Scissors are used but most often a piece of glass or china is used to cut the thread.

Like the weaver, the Indian embroiderer is an artist whose sense of colour and design never flags. He avoids useless and wasteful decoration, always keeping his product within realms of good taste. The best Indian art has a universality whose infallible harmony and grace never fails to please. It displays a pure and refined taste which raises the product above the status of being mere craft and lifts them to the pinnacle of creative art.

Embroidery is done in all parts of India, the work produced in each area having its own distinctive character. In many parts of the country such as the Punjab, Gujarat, Kutch, Kathiawar, Bengal and certain tribal areas, the art is folk in origin and inspiration and still forms a vital part of the everyday life of the

people. In places like Delhi, Lucknow, Hyderabad and Kashmir the rich gold, silver and silk embroidery and the delicate chikan owe their origin to court patronage and still cater to an urban clientele. It is noteworthy that whereas the folk craft is produced almost entirely by women working at home, the sophisticated work is a male prerogative except for chikan work which is also done by women as a means of supplementing the family income. All master craftsmen are men and the best work is done by them.

## MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES

In the 'Art of Embroidery' the authors Marie Schuette and Sigrid Muller-Christensen assert that in the development of embroidery there are no changes of materials or techniques which can be felt or interpreted as advances from a primitive to a later, more refined stage. On the contrary, in early works is found a technical accomplishment and high standard of craftsmanship rarely attained in later times. They, of course, were writing mostly about European and Middle Eastern work which dates from about the 5th century B. C. In India this holds true for the specimens available to us which, unfortunately, do not pre-date the 16th century A.D. From the frescoes and statues we can be sure of the fineness of the work but cannot categorically state whether the use of gold or silver thread and embellishment with precious and semi-precious stones was known. However, from the 16th century A.D. onwards we are in total agreement with the authors for the Mughal craftsman set such a high standard of workmanship that his successors could never surpass him and could, at best, just barely match his skill.

With exception of leather, embroidery in India has been done on woven cloth of cotton, wool, silk. A great many of the embroidered pieces that exist are severely damaged because of the exigencies of the climate, ravages of white ants and other insects, the natural wearing out of the material and



just plain neglect. As in the case of gold and silver jewellery, which was melted down in times of financial stress or just to procure metal to be fashioned in new ways, the precious metal was extracted from embroidery and melted down. Thus there are very few families where the sumptuously decorated garments and articles of daily use that formed part of practically every well-to-do girl's trousseau have existed for even two generations.

In Europe embroidered woollen garments have been preserved since the Bronze Age in Scandinavia. Greek embroideries on the same material have been found dating from the 4th century B. C. while Mongolia and Siberia had apparently developed the art around the same period. Because of the cold climate, wool was, naturally, much in demand and was used for clothing, wall hangings, rugs and cushions. Woollen cloth and felt were used for applied and patchwork. In India the famous *jamewar* shawls were woven in Kashmir. Most of them had the design woven into them but a great many were embroidered with fine silk thread. The more expensive ones showed the design equally on both sides and were called *dorukha* (double sided). The sheen of silk enriched the flat colour of the woollen material and produced a subdued look of sumptuousness that was elegance personified. Wool has also been traditionally used for embroidering both for garments and rugs and carpets. Such work was done in Kashmir where craftsmen covered the whole surface of the material with stitches to produce article of beauty. The pastel coloured chain-stitches rugs and the more sturdy *gabbas* and *namdas* have enjoyed world popularity and add a touch of glamour to any decor.

Although woollen garments have been used in India quilted ones have been more popular, perhaps, because of being comparatively inexpensive. Quilting is done in many parts of India either to hold together cotton wool between two layers of material or to bind various layers of cotton cloth together. It is used for various garments such as full, half sleeved or sleeveless vests, coats and even pyjamas. Quilting has also been used among others, for quilts, curtains, book covers, small rectangular pieces

for holding babies. Quilting is done with small running stitches in thread of the same colour as the material, the design being achieved by varying lines of stitching to produce geometrical or floral designs or by using coloured threads and embroidering the surface that will show when the article is in use.

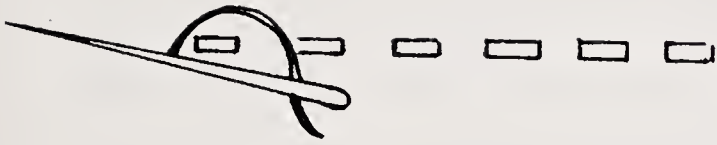
Around the year 1,000 A.D. Europe had attained a high degree of proficiency in the embroidery of silk fabrics with gold, silk and silver threads. The base material was of sturdy twill weave and sometimes an additional under layer of linen was added to give the material strength to support the heavy embroidery. Later, when velvet came to be used in the 13th century, a thin, smooth cloth of silk or linen was laid over the velvet pile to make the working easy. Any protruding edges would be snipped off when the work was completed. In India the same techniques were used except that in place of linen stiff cotton was used.

Cotton and woollen threads have to be spun while for silk spinning is unnecessary. Gold and silver threads are made by wrapping an extremely fine strip of gold or silver spirally around a silk thread. The threads achieved in this way were laid on the material and stitched on with very fine stitches. For other work the fine metal strips were threaded into the needle and used to pierce the material like ordinary thread. Tiny metal spangles with a hole through the centre are used to embellish the design. In very expensive garments the gold used was genuine while in less expensive ones silver-gilt was used. As in other countries, so in India pearls, coloured beads, semi-precious stones, pieces of mica and mirror, spangles of various shapes and sizes have all been traditionally used to aid the embroiderer to achieve the desired result.

Traditional Indian embroidery achieved its beauty and luminosity as much from the embroiderer's skill as from the quality of the materials used. The natural colours used for dyeing the thread distinguishes the work done in India from that done anywhere else. Indigo, madder and kermes (tiny insects which



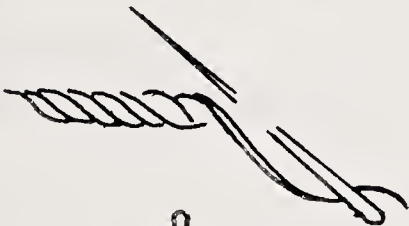
# STITCHES



Running Stitch



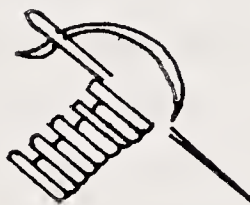
Back Stitch



Stem Stitch



Satin Stitch



Long & Short Satin Stitch



Quilting Stitch



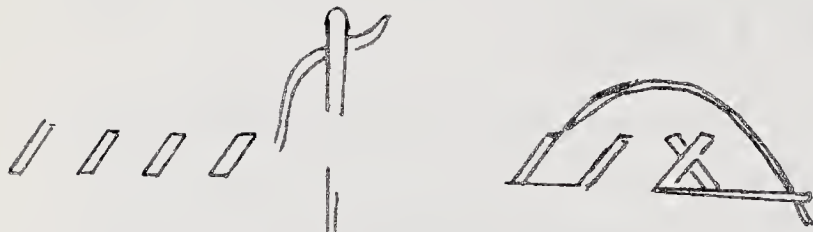
Kathiawad Stitch, Phulkari Stitch



Hetting-bone Stitch



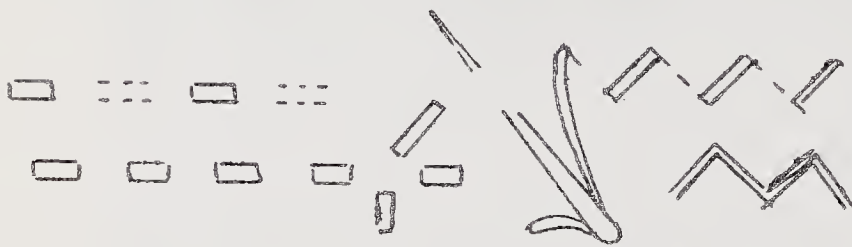
Feather Stitch



Cross Stitch

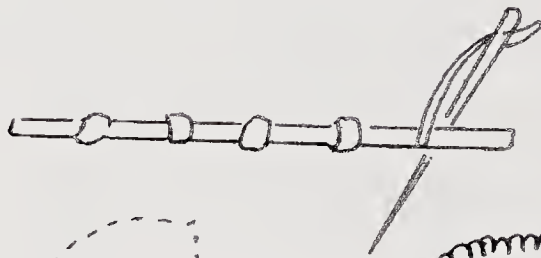


Chain Stitch



Kasuti

Double Line and Zigzag Stitch



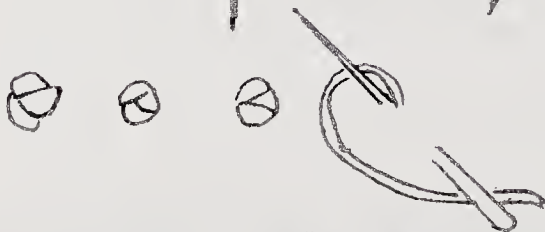
Couching or laid Stitch



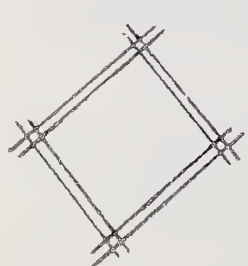
Applique and button-hole Stitch



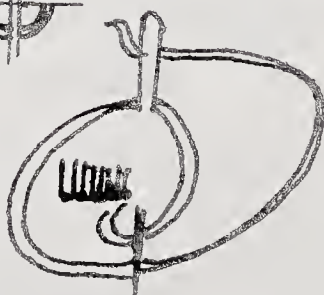
Blanket Stitch



Knotted Stitch



Interlaced Stitch



Button-hole Stitch

yield a crimson colorant) produced a range of blues, reds, violets, pinks and blacks which by mixing with other colours produced rich lasting hues that have retained their lustre through the centuries. The Indian embroiderer never uses too many colours in any one piece. Sometimes he uses a single colour, producing an impression of several shades by skilfully using vertical, diagonal and horizontal stitches. His work, thus, benefits fully from the play of light on the surface of the silk to achieve the maximum effect of richness through a minimum of decoration.

Although most of Indian embroidery is done with the needle some extremely fine chain stitch work is achieved with the ari, a small hooked awl which is a smaller adaptation of the cobbler's awl. The small ari is pushed through the cloth, the thread held below the cloth being formed into a loop around the hooked tip of the awl and the loop is then pulled through the surface of the cloth to form a stitch. The stitches can be made in fine gold and silver or silk thread producing extremely aesthetic results. Work done in this way was no less highly prized than that done by the needle.

The art of the embroiderer lies in the choice of stitches and the deftness with which they are employed. The stitches are used to form the outline or to fill in the whole surface almost like mosaic. In still other pieces they give an impression of being used like brush work in painting. Over the centuries a number of stitches have been evolved to enable the embroiderer to achieve sophisticated results. Most of the stitches are common to the work done in different parts of the world. However, variations of the basic stitches allow distinctive regional characteristics to develop. These depend on the type of ground fabric used, the thickness, colour and quality of the embroidery thread, the aesthetics of the embroiderer or his/her patron and the design favoured, whether geometric or figurative motifs or a combination of both.

The embroidery stitches used in India link the work done



here with that of other countries. The satin stitch used in Kashmir is a variation of that done in China where it originated. The darning stitch, which produces the sumptuous '*bagh*' and '*phulkari*' work of the Punjab, has affinities with the stitches used in Baluchistan and the Middle East and parts of Europe. The interlacing stitches of Kutch and Kathiawar have their counterparts in Spain, while the '*Kasuti*' of the Karnataka bears a close resemblance to the embroidery of Austria, Hungary and Spain. The white on white *chikan* work of Uttar Pradesh is similar to the washable linen embroidery of Europe. The silk embroidery done in Surat has a strong Chinese influence. There is no doubt that navigators and traders, like the Arabs, have been instrumental in disseminating culture and influencing crafts by making available designs and materials of one region to another.

Indian embroidery uses many different stitches as well as variations of the basic stitches.

*Running Stitch:* This is the simplest of all stitches. The needle runs for equal distances over and under the ground material. This is the stitch used for quilting in India. A variation is the double running stitch in which a preliminary row of running stitch is worked and the needle runs again filling in the spaces left empty the first time. The value of the double running stitch is that it looks exactly alike on both sides of the cloth. Worked in close rows to fill a surface it is known as double darning. A variation is the zig-zag running stitch which is like the double running stitch, only the stitches are slanting instead of being straight

*Back stitch* is like double running stitch except that it shows overlapping stitches at the back and so cannot be used for double-sided embroidery. In this stitch the needle moves backward the length of one stitch passes down through the cloth, moves forward the length of two stitches and is brought up through the cloth again.

*Stem stitch* is a fine outlining stitch which appears on the



front of the work as a row of oblique even-sized stitches. The needle passes up through the cloth, moves forward the length of one stitch and then, moving down through the cloth, moves back for a shorter distance and passes up through the cloth again beside the previous stitch.

*Split-stitch* resembles the stem stitch except that the needle actually passes through the thread of the previous stitch splitting it.

*Chain stitch* is a loop stitch in which the thread is passed over the point of the needle as it emerges from the bottom of the cloth, to form a loop which is secured by the following stitch. This bears a strong resemblance to the split stitch and can, like it and stem stitch, be used for outline or inner drawing or arranged in parallel lines and spirals, can also be used for filling a surface. Many variations of the stitch are possible. These are open chain stitch, made by inserting the needle at a slant thus forming broad open loops and the double chain stitch which is made by inserting the needle alternately at the right and left of the line of loops. The popularity of chain stitch seems to have been universal. Archaeological finds in Turkestan and Mongolia dating back from the beginning of the Christian era show it to have been much used by Chinese embroiderers. Fragments found at Kerch in the Black Sea area, dating back from a few centuries before Christ are also worked in the same stitch. That the stitch could be adopted to very fine work such as characterisation of faces and natural landscape is demonstrated in the European embroideries of the Middle ages. The stitch is also extensively used in Coptic, Byzantine and Greek work. In India the stitch was very popular and it was Indian embroidery exported to Europe which revived interest in the stitch in the 17th and 18th century.

*Feather stitch* is worked in a manner similar to the open chain stitch but here the open loops of the chain are placed at a slight angle to form a feather-like pattern at one side of the row. In double feather stitch the loops are worked on each side

of the row. Other variations are achieved by adjusting the angle of the loops, by placing the stitches diagonally or by leaving the free end of the loop longer.

*Buttonhole stitch* is a right angled loop stitch which got its name from being used in Europe to finish buttonholes.

*Blanket stitch* is similar to buttonhole stitch, being used to finish the edges of blankets. This stitch can also be used as fillers or for finishing scalloped or other fancy cut edges. It can also be made to outline circles on the surface of the cloth.

*Cross stitch* also known as *gros point*, consists of an oblique stitch crossed at the centre by another oblique stitch of equal size. If the oblique stitch is not crossed by another it is known as *petit point*. Cross stitch came into popularity in Europe only in the 16th century but from then on it became the most popular stitch for covers, wall-hangings and embroidered furniture. In India it is much used for folk embroidery. It can be used singly or in an infinite variety of patterns.

*Herringbone stitch* is a variation of the cross stitch, the cross being made at the top and bottom of the row instead of in the middle. This can be used as the basis of a wide variety of interlaced stitches or may be decorated by couching the crosses. Variations can be achieved by spacing the stitches closely; by working two rows of the stitch over each other so that they intersect in different ways to form a variety of patterns of greater or lesser intricacy. On the back of the cloth the stitches form parallel rows giving the appearance of back stitch. Close herringbone stitch is sometimes worked on the back of the material so that the parallel lines lie on the surface and the crossed stitches lie underneath. This is known as crossed back stitch.

*Interlacing stitch* This is done on the base of double herringbone stitch in which two rows of herringbone stitch are worked over each other so that they intersect. For better interlacing, when the first row is being worked, after each step taken at the top of the row the needle is slipped under the

previous stitch instead of over it, but after each stitch taken at the bottom of the row, the thread passes over the previous stitch in the normal way. When working the second row of herringbone, after each stitch taken at the bottom of the row, the needle is taken under the adjoining stitch of the first row, but after each stitch taken at the top of the row, the thread passes over the adjoining stitch in the usual way. The thread for final interlacing is begun along the upper half of the foundation row, threading the interlacing stitches through the surface threads of the foundation row without penetrating into the fabric. When the upper half of the pattern is completed, the interlacing is done along the lower half of the foundation row a perfect sequence of interlacing being maintained throughout.

*Satin stitch* consists of parallel or radiating stitches worked closely together to completely cover the ground material both at the front and the back. This stitch, used in various lengths and colours, can produce subtle shading giving the work an impression of depth. The effect achieved could be likened to painting.

A variation of the satin stitch is what has been described as 'a filling stitch with ridged edge.' In this the outer edges of the stitch are finished with looped ridges worked in the same way as the buttonhole stitch.

*Brick stitch* is a variation of satin stitch, being a closely worked filling stitch named for the brick-like appearance it creates.

*Fly stitch* is a looped stitched worked singly, each loop being sewn down by a long fastening stitch. The stitch, named for its resemblance to the wings of the fly, can be varied by adjusting the lengths of the loops and the fastening stitch. It can also be worked in rows to form different patterns.

*Long and short stitch* is a filling stitch in which long and short stitches are worked alternately so that the longer stitches fill the spaces left by the short ones.



*Knot stitch* is achieved by winding of the thread around the tip of the needle to form a decorative knot which is then stitched down. It is used in European as well as Chinese and Japanese embroidery and has been adopted in India from both sources.

*Couched and laid work:* In this threads, cords or decorative materials such as gold and silver wire are laid upon the surface of the fabric and stitched down with sewing thread. Usually this thread matches the colour of the threads laid down so that it is almost invisible on the finished embroidery. Sometimes, however, the couching is done with different colours so that the stitches, themselves, are decorative in colour. Outlines are made by laying single threads or groups of threads. Where filling is required the threads are laid side by side covering the whole area to be embroidered. The couching is done with plain stitches or stitches arranged in a decorative pattern. For raised work a foundation of soft thick cotton thread is worked. After the foundation padding is stitched the threads of the final embroidery are laid over it. These are usually couched only at the edges of the motifs but sometimes the couching stitches are used within the motif also, passing both through the padding and the material. The technique is particularly suitable for gold and silver embroidery. A marvellous effect of light and shade was created in European embroidery from 1400 A.D. onwards by using couching stitches very close together to hide the gold thread and then spacing them widely to allow the metal to shine through.

*Darning stitch:* It is used for mending torn fabric by rows of stitchery which remake the woven texture of the fabric. For embroidery the darning stitch is a type of running stitch which is worked over the fabric in various ways to form a pattern.

*Hem stitch:* This is used to finish the hems of handkerchiefs, table clothes, etc. The threads of the ground fabric are drawn out parallel to the edge and the stitchery is pulled tightly to form a lace-like pattern. It is also used to make open work pattern on the ground fabric.

*Hemming:* In plain sewing this stitch is used for fastening a hem. In embroidery it is used for attaching various pieces to the ground fabric in applique work.

Apart from these stitches which are used all over the world there are certain variations used in Indian folk embroidery. For instance, small mirrors used in western Indian embroidered are attached with a central loop through which a ring of stitches are interlaced. A variation of this is one used for making flowers in which the central part of the stitch is worked into the cloth instead of around a loop. This is sometimes described as a 'radiating stitch'.

*Shadow work:* This is achieved by doing the embroidery on what will eventually be the wrong side of the work. Transparent fabrics such as muslin and organdy are used for this work. The design appears on the right side of the material as an opaque shadow with very fine stitches showing around the edges where the *needle* has been inserted. In another variation, the motifs are embroidered in applique work applied underneath the cloth appearing as a shadow on the surface. In India such work is a feature of the *chikan* embroidery.

The Indian embroiderer belongs to no special caste, community or sex. The art is hereditary like so many other skills in India, it is passed down from father to son or from mother to daughter. The people engaged in the craft may belong to such different castes as ahirs (cowherds), Kunbis (cultivators), mochis (cobblers). It is done by Hindus and Muslims, by men and women, boys and girls. Tribals, like the Lamanis and Banjaras, have also contributed work of a high order to the general kaleidoscope of Indian embroidery. Like painting it is not the special preserve of any one group of people, but is open to anyone with enough skill and imagination to gain expertise in it. Really good embroidery is like painting which, though demanding a certain framework of discipline, allows the artist an enormous degree of freedom for the expression of his genius. This is the reason why the two arts have been often treated on



an equal plane and embroidery is referred to as 'painting with the needle.'





## II

# REGIONAL STYLES

### 1. SIND AND GUJARAT

As has been noted earlier, Gujarat has, for centuries been renowned for the quality of its embroidery.

The richness of design and variety of stitches used in the state is explained by one of the legends pertaining to Krishna. On his way to Dwarka, Krishna fought and killed a demon who had imprisoned a thousand women from various parts of India. The freed women followed him and became his devotees and companions. Through them different kinds of embroidery came to the area.

Karna, the famous warrior of the Mahabharata, also brought to the region the Kathis, a nomadic tribe of cattle breeders. These, during their wanderings, gathered new motifs and techniques of embroidery which were, naturally, added to the styles contributed by the gopis. The tales of pathos and heroism of their nomadic life and songs sung by their bards, were depicted by them in their embroidery.

The main deities worshipped by them are Shiva and Ganesh and small squares, called sthapana, are embroidered with the figure of Ganesh and used for worship. The cobra, the monkey, the tiger and elephant are favourite motifs which are used along with geometrical compositions.

Sind, Kutch and Kathiawar are separated from each other by narrow strips of the waters of the Arabian Sea. In the 9th century A.D. the Arab conquerors of Sind established

settlements on the coast of Kutch and raided the coasts of Gujarat and Kathiawar. It was, therefore, inevitable that the whole region would share strong cultural influences. Further integration came in the 15th century with the conquest of Kutch by the rulers of Ahmedabad.

Even though Sind is no longer a part of India no work on Indian embroidery can be complete without mention of the work done in Sind. The state has absorbed many influences which are naturally reflected in embroidery. It was conquered by the Arabs and has geographical proximity to Baluchistan, Punjab and Kutch. The interlacing stitch worked over a laid foundation of threads is widely used in Sind. This stitch appeared very early in Germany and the Middle East from where it was probably brought to Sind by the Arabs who were great disseminators of culture. The influence of Baluchistan is also easily discernable in the juxtaposition of colours and the use of stitchery to produce abstract pattern often outlined in black and white. The Baluchi work is finer but the Sindhi embroiderer shows great vigour and creates fantastic effects by working on a background made up of a variety of patterned cotton fabrics joined together. The embroidery is sometimes done on printed material or tie-dyed cloth. In such cases the background and embroidery complement each other being used in different proportions to produce the desired effect. In other cases, however, the ground material is almost completely covered by the embroidery. In some pieces the stitches are pulled so tightly that the surface becomes firm and hard almost as if backed by stiffened material. The overall effect is heightened by the use of tiny mirrors, cowrie shells, silk tassels, glass beads, and silver spangles.

The work is done in silk and cotton thread on cotton or silk. The colours used are of various shades of red, orange, yellow, violet, green, black, white, indigo, brown, pink, turquoise, and blue. The stitches used are satin, straight, back, chain, open chain, buttonhole, interlacing, couched straight, laid threads, couched, crossed herringbone, oversewing (for edges), stem, fly and darning. The interlaced stitch is used around a central loop for affixing mirror discs. Chain stitch is

often decorated with cross stitch to imitate couching. The darning stitch is some-times as much as an inch in length. Leaves and flowers are brought into sharp relief by the use of a tight buttonhole stitch.

The Sindhis who settled in India after the partition of the country brought their embroidery tradition with them and it is now as much a part of Indian embroidery tradition as any other.

Embroidery upon silk probably evolved from the leather embroidery produced by the *mochis* (cobblers) of Sind. What is interesting is that these same artisans, using a refined version of the same tool (*ari*) switched over to embroidering garments and other silk articles thus relinquishing their age old profession of producing leather goods. Others who took up the work were Kunbis and Ahirs, cultivators and cowherds, who also turned away from their caste occupation to adopt an entirely different trade.

The work of this area shows a delicacy and refinement that can only be the result of court patronage. Designs are large and flat done in one or two basic colours to which are added lines of other colours to provide details, such as the veins of leaves, the pistil of flowers and the varied hues of the peacock.

The basic work is done in chain stitch, although borders can be finished with rows or couching or herringbone stitch with chain stitch motifs between the lines. Occasionally, pieces of mirror or mica are introduced to give a touch of glitter to the work.

The motifs employed are peacock, elephants, fans, parrots, canopies, arches, flowering shrubs, flowers, leaves, human figures, and butis (polka dots). Large sized polka dots are known as *Nadir Shahi butis*.

In Northern Kutch the best work is done by the Jats of the Banni tract and the Lohanas of Khavada. The former immigrated here from Baluchistan and their work retains the small intricate geometric patterns of their country of origin. Their embroidery is generally done on *gajji* (satinlike material) and is ornamented with small pieces of mirror cut into shapes of



flowers and petals. The original geometric patterns, over a period blended happily with the indigenous Kutchi floral ornamentation. Their dress is different from the *ghagra*, *choli* and *odhni* of the rest of the area. The long dress (*aba*) of the women is worn over ankle-length salwars which are embroidered at the lower part of the legs visible under the *aba*. (The *aba* was worn by itself in Kashmir but in recent years the salwar has become an integral part of the dress of the area). The *aba* is embroidered at neck, sleeve and hem. There is a pointed yoke-panel at the front of the bodice which sometimes extends to join a floral medallion below the waist. The back is also often ornamented.

The Lohana work is in chain stitch and open chain stitch and is liberally embellished with small mirrors. A large octagonal motif, composed of a number of floral *butis*, dominates a ground composed of small motifs. This is very similar to the veils and sarees decorated with tie and dye motifs used in Rajasthan. The embroidery done on silk was fine but the work done on cotton for bed spreads and garments was much bolder with a distinctly folk flavour.

An extraordinary item of embroidery that has been taken note of by few authors is the *pichhwais* (temple hangings) that decorate so many temples. Painted *pichhwais* are well known and are found in museums as well as private collections but embroidered ones are rare even in museums since, once consecrated, the piece remained in the temple until worn out when it would normally be destroyed. Fortunately, a number of them are preserved in the Calico Textile Museum in Ahmedabad.

In Gujarat, Lord Krishna is worshipped in various manifestations. The temples dedicated to him in Western and Central India carry on a continuous service. At set times of the day worshippers go to the shrine for *darshan*. The idol is then revealed richly dressed and surrounded by hangings which depict the season, festival, time of day or special incidents from the life of the God.

The hangings were made at the order of the devotees for offering as gifts to the temple. Many of the embroidered ones

seem to have been copied from the painted ones originating from Rajasthan. So skilfully is the embroidery done that, except for some puckering of the cloth, it can, at first sight, be mistaken for a painting. Trees, flowers, clouds, peacocks, birds, devotees, cowherds, celestial beings and the God Himself are all depicted with organised restraint. Not a stitch is redundant and the colours give depth and harmony to the composition. Others show the ground covered with floral motifs while cows line the borders on all four sides. Apart from the *pichhwais* there were covers for the steps of a shrine and pray-beads pouch in the shape of a head of a cow (*gaumukhi*). Krishna, Ganesha, Nandi and various other Hindu deities are depicted on these items.

Jain devotional embroidery forms one of the important branches of the art in Gujarat. Articles for religious use have to be in perfect condition. Any flaw—a crack in a statue, any fraying of material or loosening of the embroidery threads—make the article unfit for use and must immediately be discarded.

The items embroidered included book covers for covering the rich collection of manuscripts preserved in famous monastries and temples. Other items were canopies, articles of presentation to monks and nuns and wall hangings. These were embroidered in silk or silver and silver-gilt thread and bore typical characteristics of Jain painting—the protruding eye, the long pointed nose, the slight touch of a double chin.

One of the oldest pieces of embroidery found in India, dating from the 15th or 16th century, is of Jain origin and is now in the Calico Museum in Ahmedabad. It is a part of a cloth made for presentation to a Jain nun. It shows eight *Vidyadevis* (Goddesses of Knowledge) seated under canopies with their *vahanas* (vehicles) placed below them. In the spandrels are deep impressions into which discs of metal or jewels were originally attached. On each panel was an inscription of three lines of devanagari script worked in kusha grass. The inscriptions have almost completely disappeared, only a few letters being visible where prick marks of the needle remain. Red, indigo, turquoise blue, green and yellow silk are used along with strands



of the sacred kusha grass which is laid and couched with fine silk. The ground material is cotton unlike later objects which are mostly made of velvet or silk.

The motifs are sacred or floral. Book covers mostly show the Fourteen Auspicious Dreams which are dreamt by the mother of each *Tirthankara* as she lies 'in a state between sleeping and waking'. In the centre is the four-armed Goddess Mahalakshmi. Below her is the dream of the ocean, usually represented by a ship in full sail. The elephant, the bull, the lion, the vase, the lotus lake, the Rosary, the moon, the sun, the celestial mansion, the heap of jewels and flames are depicted in different ways.

Hangings (*Puthias*) used for placing behind a priest when he delivers a sermon show inscriptions; mystic diagrams of the universe; an empty throne with a bolster under a canopy of State, with fly whisks on either side indicating supreme dignity; flowers and small flowering shrubs. Apart from the gold and silver thread used for embroidery, both the Jain and Hindu work was embellished with pieces of metal, glass or even precious and semi-precious stones. The stitches used are chain stitch, skin stitch, satin stitch, straight stitch, laid work with couching in a variety of designs with touches of patchwork.

The folk embroidery of Kutch is done in cotton thread on cotton cloth. Yellow, saffron, white, purple and green are favourite colours. The work is done with darning and herringbone stitches and the motifs include those named above along with the sunflower, mango shoots and creepers. Glitter is produced by liberal use of mirrors in various shapes arranged in different ways. Neatness is achieved by pulling out a single thread and using that as the base. The stitches are made by carefully counting the threads of the ground material to produce an immaculately precise appearance.

The items produced are for everyday use. The covering for the backs of bullock are even more gorgeously embroidered than are clothes worn by people. Then, there are tasselled covers for the animals' horns and covers for the forehead, face and the muzzle so that only the eyes remain unadorned. The *pataras*



(huge wooden boxes) used for storing clothes and valuables have special embroidered covers made for them as have blankets and quilts.

Kathiawar, which took its name from the Kathis, shows a strongly folk element in its embroidery. The area is very rich in embroidered goods since the art is used for decorating even the humblest home. The *toran*, or valance, that graces the doorway and offers a welcome to the visitor, is only a foretaste of what one finds on entering the house. Sometimes the embroidery does not stop at the top of the door but extends down the two sides to form a complete and beautifully decorated doorway.

Inside the house, small square and rectangular pieces of embroidery (*chaklas* and *chandrawas*) decorate the furniture and hang on walls. The *chaklas* come with the bride's trousseau wrapped in them and are later used to hang on walls. The *bhitiya*, a wall hanging, becomes especially ornamental by being made up of a combination of embroidered pieces. All these combine to produce a colourful sparkling interior bringing beauty and grace into the humblest home and the most humdrum life.

The work has been traditionally done by women at home and depicts the exploits of Gods and men along with much loved animals, birds and flowers. Scenes of rural life hold a mirror to the activities of the people of the area.

The designs are hand-drawn on cotton cloth and are worked with silk floss (*heer*). The embroidery is done in long stitches, use being made of tiny mirror to give glitter to the centres of flowers or eyes of animals and birds.

Various influences have been brought into Kathiawar embroidery. In the 19th century, the *mochi* embroiderers employed by the Kathis brought in a new sophistication but, as happened in the art of painting all over India, the craftsmen used the motifs dear to the hearts of their patrons while using their own techniques. The ari-work chain stitch of the *mochis* was also combined with the decorative needle-work stitches of the Kathis to produce a whole new range of stitches and designs.

Another synthesis took place when the Mahajans, the merchants of the Southern and Western districts of Kathiawar, who produced work of geometric ornamentation with mirrors began to employ *mochis* to embroider for them. This, along with influences absorbed from Europeans and Parsees, diluted the austerity of the original Mahajan design and produced work that was an amalgam of styles. The rural workers themselves absorbed new influences, copying the floral designs of the *mochis*. The long stitches done in silk floss covering the entire surface of the base material bears a strong resemblance to the *bagh* and *phulkari* of the Punjab.

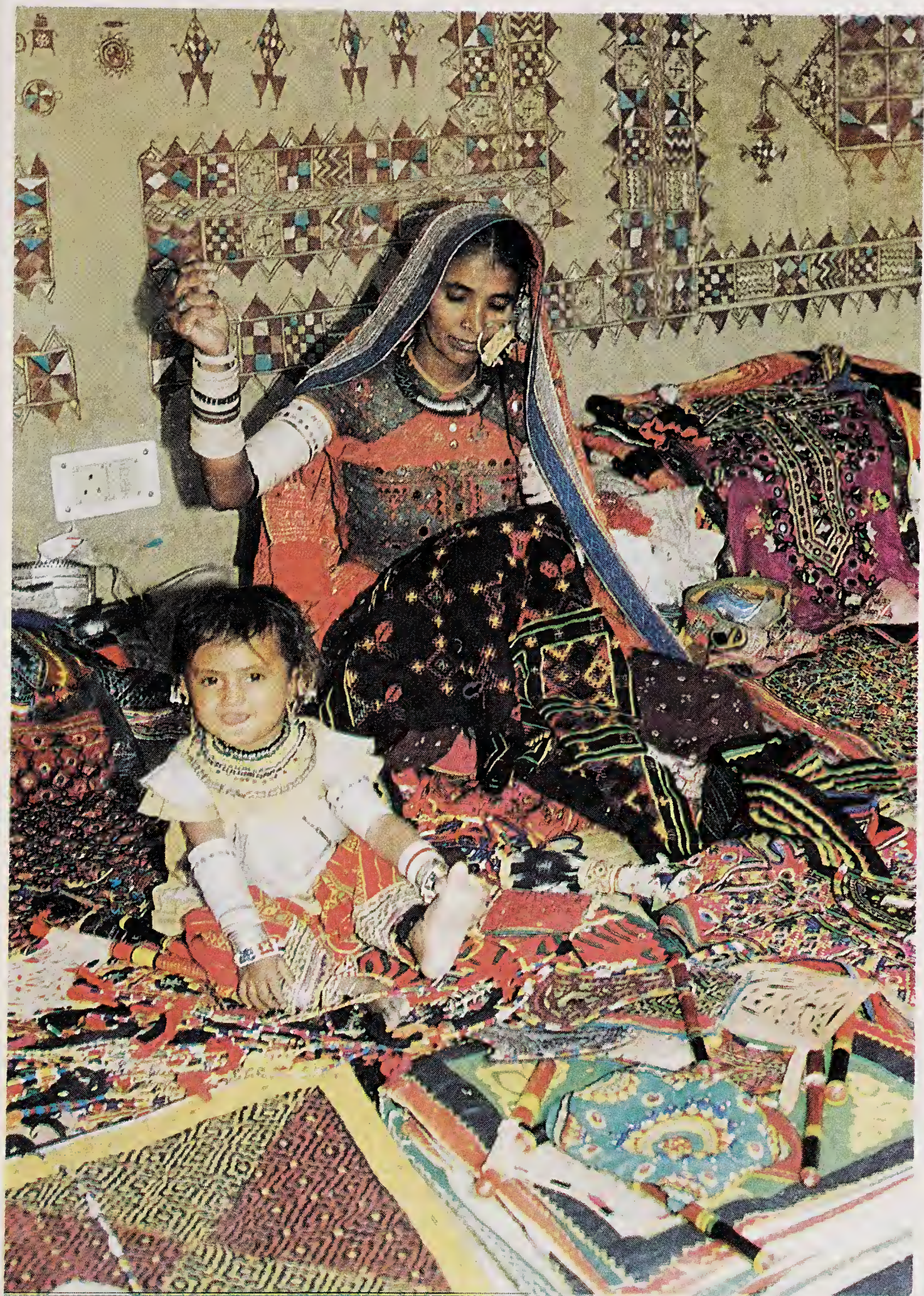
Very elementary devices are used to create maximum effect. A square is divided by two diagonal lines creating four triangles. A single mirror is placed at the point where the apex of the triangles meet. The long stitches are placed vertically and horizontally in each alternating triangle to create a rippling effect of light and shade without changing either material or stitch.

This technique is used to maximum effect in the quilts known as *gudari*. The layers of material, usually white, are held together with tiny black running stitches placed in rows over the whole surface. Bold embroidered motifs of birds, animals, deities, plants and flowers are skilfully spaced so that their rich coloured threads and glittering mirrors form the perfect counterpoint to the black stitches and the white material of the background.

A variation of the embroidered quilt is the one in which the surface material is printed and the design is produced by sewing four or five plain bands of different coloured material around the edges. The tiny stitches in one of the colours of the print which cover the fabric, depress and raise it enough to relieve it from the ordinariness of mere printing.

Apart from the long stitch the Kathis use the chain stitch also. The interlacing stitch is also used though rather sparingly. Patchwork is another favourite. Pieces of silk and gold brocade and fabric ornamented by the tie and dye process are used to give beautiful variegated hues to the finished products. Different animals, humans and landscapes are created by cutting the





Bead Embroidery of Gujarat



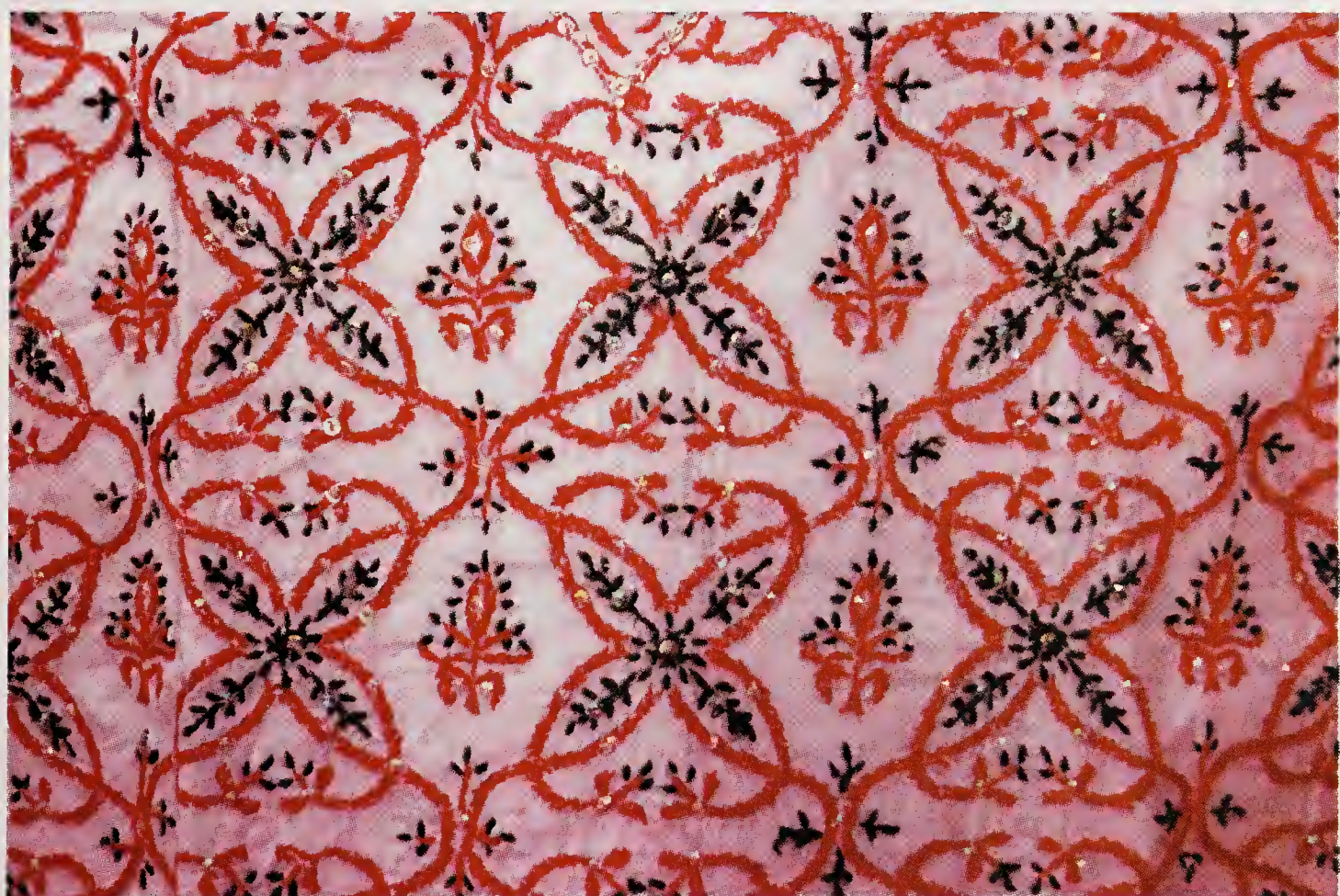


Mirror Embroidery of Gujarat





Kantha embroidery, West Bengal



Fine chikan work on malmal, Lucknow



Hand embroidered Kashmiri Shawls





Namda embroidery Kashmir



Embroidery on bed cover, Kashmir



Embroidered Saree, Bengal







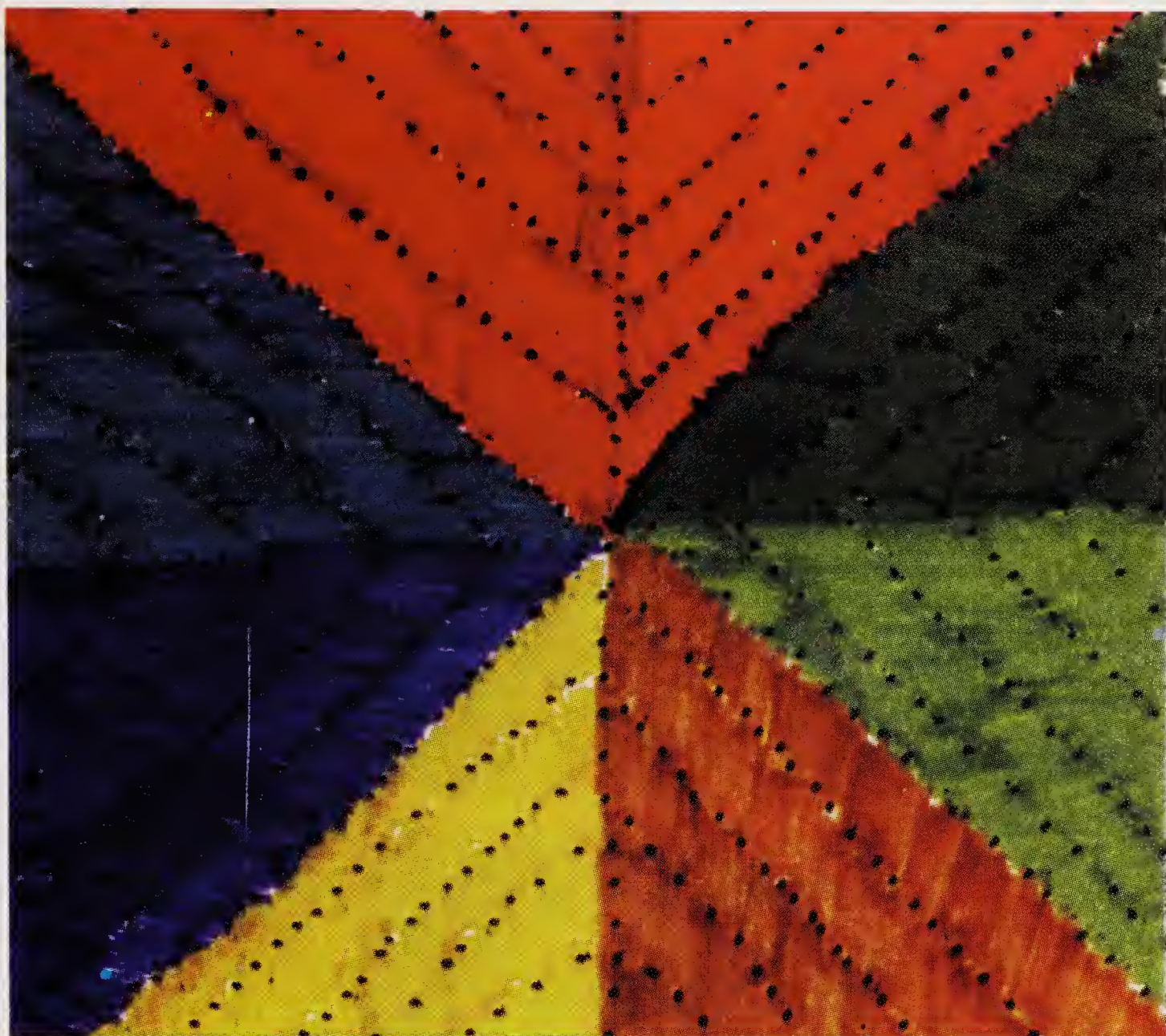
Kantha embroidery, Bengal





Phulkari work of Punjab, Haryana

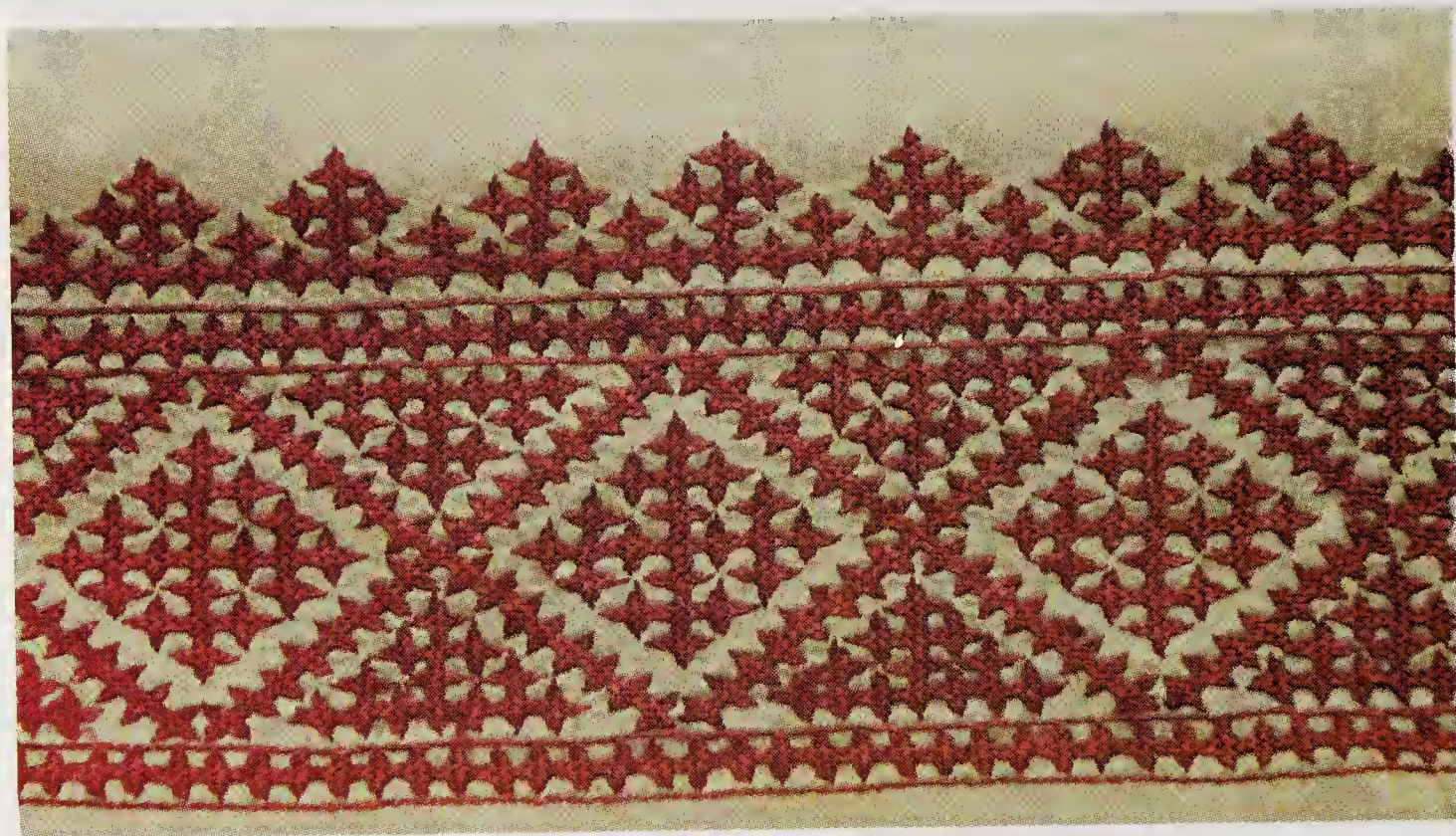




Phulkari stitch Punjab, Haryana



Some samples of Indian Embroidery





pieces and putting them together to create the desired pattern—a garden in bloom, a mythological story or a hunting scene. The work is done on white ground, the applique being in different coloured cotton cloth, the patterned materials being used to depict decorative details. Large square panels of material are sometimes fretted in formal designs through which the white of the base material shows to advantage. Applique is used for articles such as festival hangings, covers of carriages and back clothes of animals. Mirrors are often used to enhance the effect of the applique.

Whether the animals are real or mythological—the *gajasinha* (half elephant half lion), the *kinnara* (half fish, half elephant)—and whether the scene shows humans or Gods, a striking feature of Kathiawar embroidery is the movement with which each figure is imbued. One can almost see the wheels of the chariot turn as the horse pulls it forward. Singers sing, dancers dance, devotees worship, horses gallop and elephants move at a brisk pace. Even in pieces where the drawing is elementary and closely resembles the drawing done by primitive man in caves, the sense of movement is never lost. Nothing is ever static and the work is always full of life and vigour.

## BEAD WORK

Beads, transparent and semi-transparent are extensively used in Kathiawar to produce a remarkable line of embroidery. Unlike other places where the beads are stitched on cloth to form a pattern, here they are used with no backing material at all. A large number of different beads and a needle and thread are the only materials with which the craftsmen creates *chaklas*, door hangings, belts, bags, pot covers and a variety of other objects. The design is, so to say, woven with the needle and thread. The work is done row by row on a tri-bead system, three beads being taken up at each stitch. On the return row the stitching of the bead moves forward in one position so that a tight network is created. Usually the background is white with the pattern in different colours. The same motifs are used here as on cloth embroidery. Even though the patterns are, of

necessity, more geometric than in ordinary embroidery, the sense of movement is achieved in ingenious ways ——by bending a leg, elongating an arm or giving a decided bent to the reins of a horse.

The craft developed in India in the 19th century when beads were brought here by European traders as articles of trade.

## **CHINAI OR CHINESE EMBROIDERY**

Trade links between the West coast of India and China had existed for a long time. The Parsees were especially active in this trade. Groups of Chinese craftsmen settled in different parts of India. In Surat, Chinese embroiderers turned out work that was Chinese in conception and execution but was suited to their Indian clientèle. Saris, cholis, children's dresses were embroidered on silk with silk floss or tightly spun two-ply silk that was not normally used in India.

The designs consisted of cartouches enclosing birds and flowers linked together with panels of formal ornament. Flying cranes, cocks with tails spread and doves were other motifs used. The work was done in satin stitch, straight stitch, knot stitch, chain stitch and stem stitch in white, red, various shades of pink, green, blue and lilac.

The work is different enough from Indian embroidery to be recognisable at a glance. At one time it was highly priced and greatly valued by fashion conscious people.

## **2. KASHMIR**

Embroidery, along with other arts, came to the Kashmir valley when the ruler, Zain-ul-Abidin Shah (1423-1474 A.D.) invited artists from Iran to train the local people into a wide range of crafts. Successive rulers continued to give encouragement to the workers and the Mughals, who were enchanted with the area and spent the summers there, extended their informal patronage to the valley and turned all its crafts into arts. This patronage, combined with the natural artistic aptitude of the people, gave a firm basis to the crafts which,



through the centuries have flourished as a cottage industry producing objects of unmatched delicacy and elegance.

In Kashmir embroidery is known as *Kashida*, a Persian word which, among others, means embroidery as well as drawing. It uses simple stitches such as the satin, stem, chain and long and short stitches and makes occasional use of the herringbone, button hole and darning stitches. The *jali*, open work, is used to produce a lace like effect. The work is done on silk with single silk thread.

The refinement of Kashmir work surpasses that done anywhere else in the country. Not only does the embroiderer produce surface designs of great intricacy and fineness but he excels in the *dorukha*, the double-sided work in which both sides are the same so that there is no right or wrong side and the article can be used from both sides. A further refinement of this is when the colours on both sides are different. This is done especially on shawls which are the great pride of Kashmir. The woven Jamewar shawls, the ultimate product of the loom, show innumerable refinements such as delicate shadings on flower and bud, details of the plumage of birds and the same *dorukha* effect in which even the ground colour on both sides is different. But the *ambli*, the embroidered Jamewar, achieves extra richness by using delicate filling in stitches in threads of different colours to enhance the effect of the woven material.

The valley of Kashmir is one of the most beautiful natural area in the world. Surrounded by mountains the valley reflects them in innumerable placid lakes and paddy fields. Poplars, chenars and cypresses dominate the scene along with other trees like the walnut, almond, plum, apple and cherry. The climate is temperate and the flora reflects it. The iris, the tulip, the lily, plum, almond and apple blossoms flourish along with the lotus, the pomegranate, of course, the lovely saffron flower, a field of which seen in bloom is said to be so beautiful that it makes the observer burst out laughing. The colours are there but they lack the exuberance of the flora of tropical regions.

All these shapes and colours are, naturally, reflected in the crafts of the area. Surrounded by so much of nature's bounty

the craftsman does not have to look elsewhere for his designs. The chenar leaf and the tall, tapering cypress dominate Kashmir designs. Among the birds the kingfisher is a great favourite followed by the magpie, the parrot, the woodpecker and the canary. Human figures are used only in the *shikargah*, hunting scenes which was a favourite pattern for shawls.

The designs are always evenly balanced and even though the pattern may show numerous flowers, leaves, fine stems and curving stalks, a sense of restraint is always evident keeping the decoration well under control and never allowing it to overflow the boundaries of good taste. Shades of red, pink, blue, yellow, mauve, green and white are used but these reflect the natural colours of the objects depicted and are always subtly blended to avoid garishness. The whole effect is flat and formalised.

This type of embroidery is done on articles of personal wear such as shawls, blouses, sarees, and on table linen. The really fine work requires years of training. A visit to a Kashmir craft centre shows how the system works. In a row on the floor of course, sit the workers, all men. The youngest, usually a boy of about eight years old, sits at one end and the oldest, a man sometimes well over 60 years old sits at the other end. In between sit others graded according to age. The boy does the most elementary work on the piece being worked upon. He then passes on the work to the next man who does the slightly more complicated work. The work is thus handled by different people according to their degrees of expertise until it reaches the oldest man who puts in the final and most difficult touches. The apprenticeship system, which can be the only possible method of achieving excellence in handicrafts, is still as much in vogue as it has ever been.

Coarser and more sturdy embroidery is done with the awl or crewel on yards of thick, cotton material used for making curtains, cushions and on floor coverings such as *namdas* (carpets), *gabbas* (floor-covering) and chain stitch rugs. In all these the chain stitch is used in varying degrees of thickness. The yard goods are usually done in floral designs and when the



whole surface needs to be ornamented, flowers and leaves are joined together with curling stems. A line of dark colour immediately next to that in a light colour gives an impression of depth and richness. The embossed effect created by the work makes it a nice change from printed or woven materials and accounts for its great demand in the international market

*Namdas* are made by pressing felt together. They are then embroidered with chain stitch. At one time they were considered the cheapest floor covering but designers have taken a hand in them and made them so attractive that they have become an art form and have been raised from the floor to the wall where they hang in place of pictures.

Chain stitch rugs are done in pastel shades on hessian cloth and are extremely attractive. The whole surface is covered with the embroidery and is then backed with strong cotton backing material to give them strength and body. The light pinks, blues, creams and greens, blend together in such an aesthetic whole that the rugs become almost too beautiful to be placed on the floor. Bags, screens and cushion covers are other applications of this art.

*Gabbas* are made from old worn out blankets pressed together. Felt applique in bold designs is held down with chain stitch done with a hook. The designs are bold and can be floral or geometrical. Special designs are made to suit any taste or meet any demand. Thus, those made for children's rooms show scenes from fairy tales or nursery rhymes or birds and animals.

If imitation is the best form of flattery, the Kashmir craftsman has been exposed to such flattery for centuries. In the 19th century, beautiful Kashmir Jamewar shawls were reproduced on power looms in England and France. The designs have been printed on shawls and scarves in Czechoslovakia and by the famous firm Liberty of England.

### **3. PUNJAB AND HARYANA**

Embroidery has for centuries been part of the education of every well brought up Punjabi girl. The Granth Sahib, the

religious book of the Sikhs, says “Kadh Kasida pehreh choli, Ta Tum Janoh Nari” (Only when you have yourself embroidered your choli will you be considered an accomplished woman).

The *phulkari* is the glory of the Punjab and Haryana regions. The word meaning “flower working” at one time meant any embroidery, but later came to be restricted to embroidered *odhnis*, long sheets for covering the head and shoulders. Worked in silk floss on cotton cloth the *phulkari* and *bagh* (as the more profusely embroidered pieces came to be called) became, over a period of time, an integral part of the life and tradition of the people. By the middle of the 19th century, the accomplishment of a bride and her mother and the affluence of the family were judged by the number and elaboration of the *phulkaris* and *baghs* that she received as part of her trousseau. Ceremonial pieces, especially made for the occasion, would cover a girl at various times of her life——during the wedding, after the birth of her children, during festivals and ceremonies and at the time of her death.

Other pieces would be used as curtains, wall hangings, cushions and bed covers.

The work was done entirely by women during their leisure hours and was meant exclusively for personal use having no commercial value. The care and attention bestowed on it was, therefore, unlimited. Since the women vied with each other in producing the best pieces each one became a canvas for the maximum expression of imagination and skill.

The embroidery for the girl’s trousseau began almost as soon as she was born. Appropriate ceremonies and prayers, followed by distribution of sweets and *prasad*, marked the beginning of the embroidery by the child’s mother or grandmother.

Sometimes the cloth was woven at home, at others it was bought from the village weaver. The looms being small, the width of the cloth ranged between 45 and 60 centimetres. Two or two and half pieces would, therefore, be joined lengthwise to produce the required width. The coarser the cloth the easier it was to do the work, for the basic structure of the embroidery depended



on careful counting of threads of the base fabrics. A material in which the threads were very fine required great skill, patience and time to embroider. The coarser material had to be selected with care for if it had too many uneven threads the quality of work would suffer. The sturdy material used had lasting quality and the labour involved in the embroidery would not be wasted because of the fragility of the material. Covered with the silk floss of the embroidery the *odhni* was not only beautiful but also provided adequate protection against the cold northern winters.

The material could be dyed at home by the women themselves or commercially by the village dyer. The most favoured colour was red in its various shades. Brown, blue, white and black were also extensively used. Green was rarely used and a green *phulkari* in the Calico Textile Museum at Ahmedabad is unusual. Dark shades being more practical were preferred, although white cloth was preferred by elderly ladies for their own use.

Soft, untwisted silk floss called "Pat" used in the work came from Afghanistan, Kashmir and Bengal and even China and was dyed in different places in the Punjab. The most frequently used colours were yellow, red, crimson, blue, white, brown, orange, violet and green. Apart from the silk, cotton and even woollen threads were used, sometimes in conjunction with the silk threads and sometimes alone.

The work was done with a single thread which, being fluffy and liable to break, had to be handled very carefully. As the work progressed the part that was completed had a white muslin cloth placed on it and was rolled up and tied in a clean white cloth to prevent soiling. The work would continue on the remaining portion.

As in Kathiawar embroidery, the *Phulkari* derives its richness from the use of the darning stitch placed in different directions— —vertical, horizontal and diagonal. The embroidery is done from the wrong side. The pattern is controlled by the counting of the thread, but quite often the outline of the pattern is embroidered on the cloth in green thread. The needle picks up only one thread at a time so that at the back the pattern

is delineated with single lines of colour in extremely fine stitches. In the front the stitch ranges from  $\frac{1}{2}$  to  $\frac{1}{4}$  cm in size. In the *bagh*, a single thread of the base material separates one pattern from the other. Thus an area is divided into twelve squares by this fine line, the squares themselves being covered with stitches going in different directions. Being done on such thick material the embroiderer can work without a frame since there is no likelihood that the cloth will pucker.

The stitches used are darning, stem, herringbone, satin, straight, back, running, blanket, split, cross and chain.

*Phulkari* differs from *bagh* in that in the former larger portions of the base material are visible, the design being scattered. In the latter, the embroidery covers the surface so as to become the material itself. In another form, the *chope*, which is presented to the bride by her grandmother-in-law the embroidery is done in yellow with occasional touches of blue or green only on the borders, the field, always red, being left plain. Here there is no right or wrong side the stitches being even on both sides.

The *bagh*, literally garden, is so named because it takes its inspiration from nature. They are named for various vegetables— *kakri* (cucumber), *mirchi* (chilli), *dhaniya* (coriander), *gobhi* (cauliflower) and so on. Others are named after well-known gardens laid by Mughal and other rulers— Shalimar, Charbagh, Chaurasia—attempt to depict their layout. Still others are named after cowrie shells, waves (*Lahirya*) and light and shade (*dhup chhaon*), the cypress (*sara*), river (*dariya*) and so on. The number of colours used also suggest names— *Pachranga* and *satranga*—five and seven coloured. The *Darshan Dwar*, meant for presentation to temples and religious institutions after one's wish is fulfilled, has an architectural design. Tall gates face each other while numerous humans and animals pass between them. In the *Bawan* (Fifty-two) *Bagh*, 52 different geometric patterns are embroidered thus giving it its name.

The *phulkaris* are much less sophisticated but extremely interesting. They reflect the daily life of the people and have articles of daily use such as combs, toys, fans, various pieces



of jewellery, animals, birds and folk motifs embroidered on them. The depiction can be either naturalistic or stylised. Women can be seen churning curd, winding yarn, grinding corn or just walking. Men are shown with ploughs tilling fields, riding a horse or just lying around. When men and women appear together, sometimes the man beats his wife, at others she offers him a glass of, perhaps, *lassi* and once in a while quarrels with him. Morality is registered by an adulterous couple being bitten by snakes from all sides. Progress is not forgotten and the railway train chugs along belching smoke with passengers looking out from each window.

Occasionally mirrors were inserted into the work giving it a glittering appearance. The *sheeshadar Phulkari*, as it is called, was extremely popular in parts of Haryana. Sometimes, though very rarely, small pieces of silver would be introduced to enhance the value of the piece.

Superstition being an integral part of the life of an Indian it is natural that those practising the crafts cannot be immune from it. As a device to ward off the evil eye the embroiderer would make a magnificent piece of work less perfect by introducing some imperfection—a small corner done in a different pattern or left plain; the use of some coloured thread at odds with the general colour scheme; an animal or bird outlined and not filled in; a small “Om” embroidered in a corner or just leaving a thread hanging to indicate that the work was not completed, were other ways of keeping off evil spirits.

Once in a while one or more names can be found embroidered in a corner. They may be the names of the women who have worked on the piece or may be the name of the owner and another member of the family.

From the end of the 19th century, when there was economic distress, *phulkaris* and *baghs* became commercial commodities but they were still mainly retained for personal use. In 1947 when refugees poured into India they were sold in great quantities to bring in necessities of daily life. Now they are manufactured only commercially since changing conditions and tastes have, more or less, eliminated their traditional use.

#### 4. HIMACHAL PRADESH

The town of Chamba, situated on the river Ravi, was one of the important centres of miniature painting as it developed in what was formerly known as the Punjab Hills. The Kangra style with the dreamlike quality of the background peopled with women of porcelain like beauty developed its own characteristics in Chamba.

While the painter was employed by his patron, the raja and his nobles, to record important happenings in the court, to paint mythological subjects, to depict the various musical modes (the *Ragamala*), the seasons (*Baramasa*) and to show lovers in various stages of the agony and ecstasy of love (*nayika* series), the ladies of the court produced the sama motifs with their needles and with an equal amount of skill.

They had a ready reference for their work in the murals executed in the rooms and verandahs of their quarters. These murals, the composite work of many artistes, were, in effect miniature paintings done on walls. The paintings were laid out in small panels usually 60 cm x 75 cm and were surrounded by floral borders. The ladies reproduced them in their embroidery down to the floral borders.

The *rumals*, handkerchiefs, were used on all festive occasions as a symbol of goodwill and affection. They were presented as gifts and were used for wrapping gifts exchanged at weddings.

They were also used for covering dishes full of food. A miniature painting of the 18th century in the Lucknow Museum shows a lady carrying a dish covered with an embroidered *rumal*.

The *rumals* are made of fine cotton or muslin and are embroidered with silk and sometimes with silver and silver gilt wire. It is presumed that the subjects were drawn in outline by the women themselves. However, certain unfinished *rumals* show such sophistication of drawing that it seems that they were drawn by the painters, usually in earth-red colour.



The figures are finely drawn and life like and, especially in the *nayak-nayika* paintings the faces are strongly imbued with the expression desired to be depicted. Thus the Abhisarika Nayika “she who goes out to seek her lord” is shown so intent on her purpose that though she braves flashes of lightening and pouring rain, with snakes dashing across her path, she is not daunted but lifts her skirt and goes on. The Abhisandhita Nayika, “she who has rejected her beloved, sits in deep dejection while he turns his back and departs” holds up her hand as if pleading and looks towards her lover who has turned his back to her and is walking away. The Vipralabdha Nayika “she who keeps an appointment but her lover does not come” is shown standing beside an empty couch with her arms outstretched as she tears off her jewels and throws them on the ground. In the Calico Textile Museum at Ahmedabad there is a *rumal* showing eight heroines (*Ashtanayika*). Each is described in brush drawn in devanagri script. All except two of the scenes take place indoors, the architecture being depicted by small domed pavilions on the roof. Each panel is separated by a floral band and the action takes place within a specified space with enough blank space left around it to give it individuality and to separate it from the rest of the scenes. There is, so to say, embroidery within embroidery, costumes, cushions and carpets being decorated with floral patterns.

One of the favourite themes of the Chamba embroiderer as of the painter, were the playful antics of Krishna with Radha and other gopis. He is shown with her in various poses while gopis dance for their enjoyment and gopas play the conch shells and hold up the lotus flower as a salutation to the God. The *rasalila* in which Krishna dances with the gopis not as a single person but as a multiple manifestation of Himself so that each gopi finds herself dancing with Him individually is also a great favourite.

Other deities, such as Shiva, Ganesha, Durga, Vishnu, Parvati, Lakshmi, are also shown. In a *rumal* at the Indian Museum, Calcutta, they are shown attending a marriage. In scenes of festivity a variety of musical instruments such as the

veena, the tanpura, cymbals and drums are played by both men and women.

Scenes of battle and hunting are depicted with great imagination and sensitivity. In the former the *rumal* will show one army pressing the attack into the enemy's ground. Individual combat within the general battle shows men being unhorsed and swordsmen rushing in for the kill. A decapitated body is shown with the head lying to one side. In hunting scenes a variety of animals—bears, tigers, deer—are shown being attacked with various weapons—the muzzle gun, sword, spear, bow and arrow and the noose.

Chaupar, a game of dice played on two long bands of cloth joined together to form a cross, was a favourite game for both men and women. The embroiderer fills the middle ground with the decorated chaupar cloth while four sets of players sit on the four sides sometimes puffing on the hookah between moves and sometimes in animated conversation——perhaps discussing the next move.

Banana and other trees, the lotus, peacock, parrots, flowering shrubs, monkeys, deer, fishes, clouds, cranes, all give a natural background to the scene depicted. The canvas teems with life giving a tremendous sense of movement to the composition.

The embroidery is done in soft shades in small double darning stitches which appear the same on both sides. Outlines and details are worked in double running stitch and sometimes small patterns on costumes and other details are shown in coloured darning stitch. Satin and herringbone stitches, zig-zag and interlaced running stitches couching for silver gilt wire, long and short and satin stitches, gross and blanket stitches are also used. The finest *rumals* are closer to painting than embroidery while the less sophisticated ones have the pattern only on one side and the stitches do not lie so close together.

The colours used are shades of blue, yellow, orange, black, crimson, indigo, brown, grey, white, pink, turquoise, violet, red and coral.



All these *rumals* have floral borders on all four sides. The only exception to this are the ones that were embroidered in geometric patterns on the lines of the *bagh* and *phulkari* work. These are either finished off with buttonhole stitch or the geometric pattern covering the cloth is considered complete in itself and no border is made.

Obviously, craftsmen showing such a high degree of skill are not going to restrain themselves to the production of a single item. *Cholis*, caps, hand fans, bed spreads, pillow covers and triangular pieces for wrapping books were all profusely and beautifully embroidered. However, these items show a much stronger folk influence than the *rumals*.

The *cholis* are patterned to mould the breasts and to slenderise the arms and, where they extend so far, the stomach. The embroidery on the cups is ingeniously devised to show them to maximum advantage. The many petalled lotus starting from a small centre and spreading out to cover the whole cup cannot but attract the eye to that part of the anatomy. Often tiny mirrors produce the same effect. Mica pieces are used on caps, fans etc. to give an appearance of glitter. Caps are worn by both men and women—the women's caps sometimes having a panel that extends down the back. A circular motif is embroidered at the top and a floral or geometrical motif around the rim.

As in other parts of the country, so here also the designs are based on nature, mythology, articles of everyday use and happenings of everyday life. Thus Gods and Goddesses, kings and ordinary men are shown in action or sitting sedately. Animals, birds and trees can be natural or highly formalised. Geometrical designs are also very popular.

Colours are bright and bold—orange, red, black, yellow, ultramarine, purple, pink and green.

The greatest influence on this work is that of Kathiawar and Punjab. In fact, some of the work done can be mistaken for that of Kathiawar. The similarity to the *bagh* of the Punjab is also unmistakable. Since the court work was imbued with

these influences it was inevitable that they would filter down to the common people and enrich their work and their lives.

## 5. BENGAL

As has been seen earlier, Bengal has an old tradition of embroidery. It has enjoyed international repute for the fineness of the muslins woven in Dacca. With exquisite names like Running Water these were woven plain or patterned with thicker threads of white cotton providing opaque patterns on the fine ground. The *jamdani* again white on white, was woven by a brocading technique. The embroidery of Dacca followed the same process. The *pallus* and borders of sarees were finely embroidered with the same motifs of the cypress, leaf and stem used by the weaver. In addition to the white on white was the natural colour of wild silk thread to provide richness and a light and shade effect to the work. Silver-gilt wire was sometimes used to enhance the effect

Shawls, sarees, coats, girdles were all embroidered in this way. Stem stitch, running stitch, long and short stitch, chain stitch, laid work of silver gilt wire over a padded foundation of yellow cotton thread all went to augment the woven design of the fabric for embroidery was done on both plain and patterned materials creating effects of subdued richness and elegance.

The bedspreads and hangings that found so much favour with Western clients were made of fine cotton cloth filled with finely ginned cotton and were embroidered with yellow silk on the entire surface. The embroidery was done with Tussar, Muga or Eri yarn which was unknown in the West which was cognisant only with fine cultivated silk yarn. It was known as Herba since it was presumed to be derived from a herb. It was only in 1691 that the Dutch botanist Rumphius actually dissected the cocoons that he saw suspended from trees and discovered the chrysalis inside. Before that he had taken it for granted that they were the fruit of the tree.

Then East India Company's Court Minutes dated February 25, 1618 record "Then was put to sale (in London) a Bengalla



quilt of 3- $\frac{3}{4}$  yards long and 3 yards broad to be paid for in ready money, embroidered all over with pictures of men and crafts in yellow silk, Mr. Henry Garway bidding £ 20 for it." The following year the Company's factors at Agra were instructed to send quilts "stitched with birds, beasts or work very thick, such as used by the Moors instead of carpets. Of this sort there comes, it seems, from Bengalla." In 1629 Sebastian Manrique, a Portuguese missionary wrote, "Among the more important commodities dealt in by the Portuguese in Bengal are very rich back-stitched quilts, bed-hangings, pavilions and other curious articles worked with hunting scenes which are made in these kingdoms."

The animals and humans that so fascinated the buyers were very close to the folk art of Bengal. Along with indigenous, mythological and secular themes are those that show the Portuguese engaged in various activities, including the hunt, with their own countrymen as well as with Indians. In the old Indian tradition of painting the narrative unfolds in self-contained panels; the hierarchical character of the work reveals itself in enlarging the most important figures so that they dwarf the entire landscape.

Chain stitch, back stitch, knot stitch, open work produced by lines of back stitch pulled to produce small holes are all used in the natural colour of the silk.

The work was done at Satgaon, the old mercantile capital of Bengal, which from 1537 onwards lost its pre-eminence to the port of Hughli founded by the Portuguese.

The same tradition of quilting and embroidery, though in a more folkish form has persisted in Bengal. The *Kantha* used as quilt, shawl, handkerchief, pillow cover, cover for mirror, combs and toilet articles, is made entirely by women and is a marvellous example of the recycling of waste material towards the production of artistic goods. Old, worn out sarees and *dhotis* are placed one above the other, the best ones on top, the rest providing the filling. The borders have previously been unpicked to yield the thread which would be used for the embroidery. The word *Kantha* itself means patched cloth.

The embroidery, usually done in simple running and darning stitches worked through all the layers of the material to form a pattern both at the front and the back, is started at the centre usually with a lotus medallion. From this the work proceeds outward covering the whole surface with a variety of designs.

The surface not covered by the embroidery is often quilted with white running stitches made with five or six threads put into the needle to hold the material firmly together. The border is closely embroidered to provide a firm edge to the quilt. When the *Kantha* is finished it becomes a thick covering and it appears to be one piece of thick material rather than a number of fine ones welded together.

Herringbone, chain, satin, straight, double running, double darning, blanket stitch (for edges), couched are used in various combinations in different pieces.

The designs are a blend of religious and secular. Gods and Goddesses, human beings, lions and tigers, trees, flowers, nut crackers, *hoodahs*, beds, chariots, palanquins all blend cheerfully with a host of other motifs in various permutations and combinations.

A special kind of *kantha* has for its inspiration a weave that has long been discontinued. It exists now only in the *kantha*. By reproducing the same pattern in each row on a circular or linear arrangement by flat running stitches, the embroiderer skilfully creates an impression of a woven material. This perpetuation of the design could perhaps be explained by the fact that the original design was woven by women and when, for some reason, it lost its popularity as a commercial commodity other women came forward to keep it alive though in a non-commercial garb.

Applique also appears on *kanthas*, though rarely. Thin strips of coloured cloth are stitched with tiny invisible stitches to form various designs. In large pieces the designs are bold and well defined while on items of personal use they are proportionately small and finely worked.

The making of the *kantha* provides women with an outlet for self-expression. Although the themes are similar, it is in the



working that individuality shows through as in other places. This healthy competition brings liveliness and exuberance to what could easily become a lifeless and static craft

## 6. BIHAR

Bihar has one of the longest art traditions in the country. The University of Nalanda was renowned not only for its disciplines of Humanities and the Sciences but also for its artistic tradition. The sculptures of that period are noted for their serenity, grace and flowing lines. The city of Patliputra was one of the great metropolitan centres of the ancient world and its kings and nobles offered patronage to a variety of arts.

One of the folk arts of Bihar that has captured the imagination of the world is the mural painting done in Madhubani. An essentially transient art, being executed on the mud-plaster walls of small houses and renewed for each festive season, the art has been given permanence by persuading women to produce them in gouache on paper. Brightly coloured earth and vegetable dyes are used along with lamp-black to produce paintings of a startling vividness. They can be of the narrative type but are mostly depictions of deities and their symbols, scenes of everyday life and motifs from nature. The bridal chamber is beautifully decorated with symbols of fertility and during festivals the special deity connected with the occasion is depicted in various manifestations. The brushes are cotton wool or rags tied to twigs, the outlines being made by twigs frayed at one end. The work is done by women and a small girl learning to paint so that by the time she is grown up she has fully mastered the art

Embroidery is also done by women as a home craft. It is done on borders of saris, cholis and other articles of clothing and decoration. Chain stitch is very popular, followed by the *Bharat* which is akin to the *Bagh* of the Punjab, the stitch following the warp and the weft. The chain stitch is done along with applique on pieces of cloth, lace and tapes. A variation of the *Bharat* is one in which the outline is made by a double running stitch in black, the body being filled in with colour in

long and short stitch.

The designs show scenes of daily life and objects of daily use, flowering trees, flying birds, fishes, elephants with rider, deities whose attributes are reflected in various ways—the energy emanating from Durga manifesting itself through the prickly quality of the hair of the tiger on which she rides.

The *sujanis* of Bihar are similar to the *kanthas* of Bengal. They are also made of old materials and embroidered with the thread unpicked from borders of sarees and *dhotis* and are made exclusively by women. However, they differ in technique. They are more strongly folk in execution—the filling-in of the motifs is done with blocks of running stitch worked in straight lines rather than the spiral and whorls and cones of Bengal. The outlines of the motifs are usually worked in herringbone stitch in dark colours.

Applique is a great favourite and is done in two ways. Different patterns may be cut into a single piece of material which is to be attached to the ground material. This is known as *Khatwa* and is similar to fretwork. In the other style motifs are cut out individually and then attached to the ground material in different compositions. A mixture of different textured fabrics enhances the richness of the design and produces a chiaroscuro effect of light and shade. As in the rest of India this applique is used mostly for tents, *shamianas* and *kanats* which are so popular for occasions which call for a large gathering of people. The tradition started in the days when journeys were long and time consuming. Cities of tents grew up every evening in different places when a King or nobleman embarked on a journey. The tents were of different sizes and served as bedrooms, reception rooms, offices, etc. An army on the move required even more accommodation and so the making and decoration of tents became an art in itself.

The Bihar applique maker does something which the rest of the country could copy with benefit. So that traditional designs may not be lost they are collected on a master chart called *awalkhana* which each following generation can copy and, perhaps, improve upon.



## 7. UTTAR PRADESH

From the 3rd quarter of the 18th century when Oudh broke away from the Mughal Empire and became a kingdom in its own right it developed a culture of its own. Its capital, Lucknow, became renowned for its manners and etiquette. It was not robust sports that were cultivated here but exquisite refinements in the art of living. Physical activity was abhorred. Only mental exercise in the composition of verse, patronage of music and dance and cognisance of the finer points of the art of living were considered the mark of the gentleman. Time being of no consequence unlimited attention was given to perfecting nuances of dance—the kathak dancer could spend hours depicting a single mood without really moving—meticulous attention was paid to manners. The concept of politeness reached such a height that no man wanted to do anything before his companion for fear of being considered to be lacking in manners. “Pehle aap”—you first—was carried to such an extent that, according to a joke, a pair of twins remained in the womb for so long that they were born with beard and moustaches. It is said that Wajid Ali Shah, the last king of Oudh, remained seated when the British came into the place to oust him from the throne because the man who put his shoes on his feet had run away and he did not know how to put on his own shoes.

Men took hours over their toilet—hair and beard were meticulously combed and oiled and the eyes were lined with *surma*, kohl. During the summer young man would wear the flimsiest kurtas, shirts, made of the finest muslin embroidered in white to heighten the illusion of coolness.

Thus developed the famous *chikan* embroidery of Lucknow (the word *chikan* just means embroidery). It is said to have been originally introduced by Nur Jahan, the beautiful and talented wife of the Mughal emperor Jehangir who evolved the first designs but it attained its glory and perfection in Lucknow. The work became popular in a number of important cities of the Indo-Gangetic plain such as Delhi, Agra, Rampur, Banaras, Patna and Gaya but the supremacy of Lucknow remained undisputed.

The embroidery was done on a locally woven muslin called *tanzeb*, the pattern being stamped with small wooden blocks using red earth colour which washed out after the embroidery was completed. The design depended for its effect on the variety of stitches used and the different grades of threads used to form the patterns—the lace-like *jali*, the opaque fillings and the delicacy or boldness of outline and details.

The most beautiful part of *chikan* work is the open work ground which is achieved by pulling the threads apart with the needle and then taking tiny stitches to hold them apart. An effect of drawn thread work is achieved without drawing out any threads with infinite artistry, tiny raised flowers done in what seems to be french knot but are just tiny stitches made close together and tiny spiked leaves worked in thick thread would be balanced by the flat stem stitch and large areas of open work to prevent either a crowded or too scattered appearance.

Another variation of *chikan* work is the *bakhia* or shadow work. Here the work is done from the back, the stitches completely covering the design in a herringbone style. The shadow of the thread is seen through the cloth on the right side. To give a richer appearance, designs are produced with tiny back stitches on the right side over the shadow. A similar effect is created by cutting out tiny flowers and leaves in the same material as the base fabric and then applying them on the wrong side. The work is done so dexterously that the turned-in edges of the cut pieces are scarcely visible from the front of the work.

The refinement of taste of the best *chikan* workers dictated that not even the seams should be straight. So the material of *kurtas* was cut in waves along the sides. The two pieces were cut so skilfully that they fitted each other exactly. They were then stitched together to form an undulating line, a tiny piece of material being left projecting at each of the in-going waves. This was later stitched at the back of the material to create a shadow effect. All the seams of the *kurta*—six at the sides and one each 'down the sleeves—thus gave an appearance of fishes swimming in water.



The stitches employed are back stitch, chain stitch, satin stitch, buttonhole stitch, stem stitch, hem stitch forming an open work pattern, *jali* or openwork ground. The introduction of colour into the work is a very recent innovation.

The work is done by both men and women although the finest work is produced by men. In 1880 William Hoey gave a graphic description of the *chikan* industry of Lucknow. He writes, "When one wanders through the Mohallas of the city, where reduced Muhammadan families reside and where there are poor Hindu families who need to add to the scant subsistence offered by a small shop or by service, one sees women and even small children busy with needle and muslin. Thus the labour at the manufacturer's command is cheap and abundant. He is able to undersell those who go to the market from other places. This is one reason why the *chikan* business has taken deep root in Lucknow..." He noted that *chikan* as a commercial commodity was well established in northern, western and central India and even in Calcutta.

Apart from *chikan* work Lucknow and certain other cities of Uttar Pradesh excel in gold and silver embroidery but that is dealt with in another chapter.

## 8. KARNATAKA

In Kannada the word for embroidery is *Kasuti*. As with the *chikan* of Lucknow so with the *Kasuti* of Karnataka the word has become identified with the particular type of embroidery produced in that area. The best work is produced in the areas once ruled by the great Chalukya and Vijayanagar empires stressing the need for patronage for the achievement of excellence in the arts.

The work has traditionally been and still is done entirely by women. The embroidery was done on sarees, *cholis* and children's clothes and was essentially a home craft. It is interesting to note that many of the original *Kasuti* designs were reproduced on woven materials especially for making *cholis* and were known as Ilkal Khannas, Ilkalli being a place near

Bijapur and the Khanns the brocaded fabrics woven in the area.

As in other regions so here also women turned for design to their own surroundings and chose the ones that appealed to their religious, artistic or domestic instincts. The religious motifs are the *gopurams* of temples, the chariot and palanquin in which the deity is carried on ceremonial occasions, the lotus, the *tulsi katti* which is the enclosure for the sacred tulsi plant. Elephants with howdahs, peacocks with spread plumage, birds of different kinds, animals and flowers are standard motifs. The cradle, anklet-bells, palanquins and other articles of every day use are artistically depicted.

The material on which the embroidery is executed is a hand woven cloth of dark colour, usually black. The sarees, known as Ilkal sarees, have a wide silk *pallu* and border, the main fabric being thick soft cotton. The largest and most closely spaced motifs are placed near the *pallu*. As the embroiderer moves towards the main part of the saree the motifs become smaller and more scattered until they fade away gracefully with clusters of stars or mere dots.

The most frequently used colours are red, purple, green, orange and crimson. Patterns in only one or two colours are extremely rare and the usual colour combinations are orange, green and crimson or purple, green, orange and red, the brighter shades of these being preferred.

The embroidery is done in silk which, earlier, was unpicked from the tassels pendant from the *pallu*. Later it came to be obtained commercially. The basic stitches used are the back stitch, running stitch, cross stitch and zig-zag running stitch. In certain work the overall effect is of a woven design rather than of embroidery. *Kasuti* stitches are horizontal, vertical or diagonal. These are used going in one direction, the design being completed on the return journey by filling in the blank portions in the running stitch.

The *kasuti* worker uses no help such as drawing out threads or tracing the motifs to help set the pattern. The pattern is in the mind and is built up with just the needle moving in different



directions, In Coorg the basic stitches used are cross and double running stitches. The basic design is done in cross stitch but the static quality of cross stitch is relieved by working the projections in running stitch. Here also the motifs combine religion, nature and articles of daily use.

## 9. TRIBAL AREAS

The thick shawls and skirts woven by tribal people in deep colours with a variety of designs are relatively well known. What is not so well known, however, is the fact that a great many of these articles are embellished with the needle to give an added dimension to the woven design.

Most of the designs can be traced back to old legends. The snake so commonly founded in thickly wooded areas is an object of admiration, fear and reverence. The beauty of its markings, the deadly poison it secretes and the powers it is said to be imbued with have given it a special place in human legend throughout history in most countries of the world. In Manipur, for instance, an elaborate design called 'akoybi' dates back to early tales about the legenday snake, Pakhamba who, it is said, was killed. Later, the killer tried to atone for his crime by creating a pattern to represent the scales of a snake. The design is composed of circles joining each other, each circle having its own distinctive pattern. Another design is said to have been copied from the contours of a log of wood. The running lines and circular configurations are delineated in black and white for proper emphasis. In a sarong, woven either in a solid shade or with stripes, the border is so skillfully embroidered that it seems to be a part of the weave rather than a later addition. A zig-zag pattern done with silk floss in satin stitch is said to have for inspiration a caterpillar sitting on a castor leaf and nibbling its edges.

In the Arunachal Pradesh tribe of Sherdukpen there is a legend about a girl who fell in love with a snake which, once in a while to please her, took on human shape. For the rest of the time she was happy to just have him coiled on her lap.

Naturally, as she wove, the material took on the appearance of the serpent's scales. The women of the tribe embroider the cloth they wear as a knapsack around their shoulders. The swastika is a great favourite and is usually flanked by geometrical motifs. The designs come from objects of every day life—a jug, a pair of tongs, the eyes of animals, flowers, birds and shrubs. Another tribe, the Hrussos, make similar designs but interpret them differently. The sun surrounded by its corona made by horizontal lines from the centre of the design is a favourite subject. It is believed that bright sunshine is the result of a God making clouds, feed the sun with the corona. A zig zag pattern is said to be a flight of cranes while a triangle represents a mountain. In another place a triangle is said to represent teeth which show when a person smiles. Black and white squares are explained as fingerprints, a cluster of clouds or the markings of a snake. Since various objects have, over the centuries, been incorporated in the weaving and embroidery designs there is nothing surprising about the fact that modern technological products like the aeroplane should make an appearance there.

Cowries and beads are incorporated into embroidery for decorative effect. Various tribes use them on sashes, bags, belts, aprons and gauntlets. Still others weave them into the fabric itself. The nomadic Banjaras use a profusion of mirrors, tassels, spangles, beads etc. to give a sparkle to women's clothes.

The shawl that was traditionally bestowed on the Angami Naga hunter for success in warfare and hunting is embroidered with various animals and geometrical designs. The *sami lami phee*, as it is called, is black with horizontal bands of colour within which the motifs are embroidered.

The Todas are supposed to be remnants of the Greeks who came to India with Alexander the Great and penetrated as far South as the Nilgiris where they settled down. Their women sport a fantastic hairdo. The hair on top of the head is combed smoothly and is then shaped into corkscrew curls which hang down to the shoulders. So smooth and precise are these curls that it seems impossible to believe that they are not the result of the labours of an experienced hairdresser.



The men wear long shawls draped like the ancient Greeks. These are specially woven. They are plain with red and black bands at the ends placed at a distance of about six inches. The embroidery is done between the stripes, counting the weft, with stitches clustering together to produce the effect of a weave. The designs are geometrical in pattern. Since the Todas worship the buffalo, the buffalo horn design is most important. Others are derived from the flowers of the area and from articles like boxes. One design has been named after an ancient priest and another after a girl who fell from a precipice and lost her life.

The colours red, black, green, yellow, orange and white are used in various permutations and combinations. A clever effect of light and shade is produced by using alternating bands of colour tapering from dark to lighter to light on the top half and then tapering again from light to lighter to dark along the bottom half along a whole row of identical motifs.

In Manipur men's turbans have white on white applique which gives them a look of cool elegance. The rich heavy costumes of court dancers are elaborately embroidered with gold and silver and are studded with small mirrors.

Tribal embroidery is mostly done in straight stitches of different lengths made in various thicknesses of yarn. The effect is achieved not by the number of stitches used but by the manipulation of a single stitch in various ways. A zig zag pattern in which, light and dark colours and white are used in succeeding ascending and descending patterns creates an illusion of the actual rising and falling of the design. If one looks at it fixedly for a time waves seem to rise and recede in a most realistic fashion.

## 10. RAJASTHAN

Rajasthan, as its name signifies, was a conglomeration of princely states. They were of all shapes and sizes, wielding varying degrees of power and enjoying wealth and prestige according to their size and martial prowess. Whatever their wealth or size, however, one characteristic was shared by all.

The rulers were invariably patrons of the arts. Painters, woodcarvers, jewellers, gold and silversmiths and embroiderers received grants of money and land and were encouraged to turn out articles of the highest skill and ingenuity. These were used by the kings and nobles in their homes and to emphasize the grandeur and magnificence of their courts and thus, enhance their prestige. Elaborate gifts were given on all occasions and daughters carried sumptuous dowries all of which not only underscored the father's wealth but also marked him as a man of taste and learning.

Clothes, girdles, bags, tents, wall hangings, horse saddles, elephants' trappings and a host of other articles were embroidered with gold, silver and silk thread. The effect was further enhanced by incorporating precious stones and pearls into the design. The work was done on cotton, silk or velvet with a variety of fine stitches. The designs were floral, geometrical or mythological and, showed court scenes or devotees praying at a shrine in much the same way as these were depicted in painting. One bag embroidered in the 18th century shows a man squatting on the floor feeding birds. Others showed men and women engaged in various domestic and commercial pursuits.

The *pichhwai*, so beautiful a feature of Gujarat embroidery, was also made in Rajasthan where the largest number of devotees of Shrinathji, a special manifestation of Lord Krishna, live. Applique work used here to show the God surrounded by worshippers and cows. The border was made up of image of the God in various costumes and decked with different jewels.

Apart from this sophisticated work which was similar in almost all courts each region developed its own speciality. The common people beautified their clothes and articles of every day use with embroidery that used simple stitches and motifs derived from nature and objects familiar to them in their day to day living. The tradition has continued. In Bikaner women embroider their garments by counting threads and building up the pattern by following the warp and weft thus producing geometrical patterns. By using a double running stitch the



pattern appears the same on both sides making the garment reversible. The work resembles the great Rajasthan favourite, the *bandhani* or the tie and dye method of decorating fabric with colour.

Chain stitch, done in contrasting colours, is used in Alwar to produce an effect of richness and beauty. Geometrical forms are used with flowing circular lines to produce a sense of movement in the design. Stark contrast is created by producing black and white motifs on a golden yellow background.

In Sikar and Jhunjhunu, skirt borders are embroidered with a variety of birds, animals, trees, and flowers. There is a pleasing quality of naiveté in the work. The stitches used are simple— herringbone for filling and stem stitch for outlining but a three-dimensional effect is created by using a thick thread in a variety of colours.

The *ralli* is a patchwork spread made in Jaiselmer. Small pieces of material are stitched together in a decorative pattern to form the top of the spread. As in other parts of the country, the padding is made up of layers of old material held together with running stitches. Jaiselmer and Jodhpur also excel in silk thread embroidery on leather which is done especially on shoes and waistcoats. The knuckle pad is another article made of leather which is decorated with scenes resembling miniature paintings. The work done in the cities is fine and in subdued colour and is sometimes highlighted with gold or silver thread. In rural areas the designs are bolder and made with bright colours and thicker thread. Horse and camel saddles are embroidered with an awl and are richly colourful.

The obvious inspiration for the folk embroidery of Rajasthan are toys. A whole expanse of material is covered with people, projecting arms at awkward angles. Elephants have large staring eyes, short legs and long trunk falling from a small head. Trees are shaped like candelabra with stems sticking out on either side and tapering to a point at the top. A horse stands on stick-thin legs; two sausage like dogs with curling tails growl at each other while pencil slim human beings carry on various activities. The whole scene could have been lifted from a Paul

Klee Canvas or, perhaps, embroideries like these could have been the inspiration for Klee's work.

## 11. ORISSA AND TAMIL NADU

Whereas other states use applique for secular purposes in Orissa and Tamil Nadu, it is used primarily in articles relating to religious observances. In both states the work has evolved around temples—in Orissa around the famous temple of Jagannath at Puri and in Tamil Nadu in Thanjavur, the city noted for its temples and religious rituals. Articles required for use in temples or religious processions such as umbrellas, canopies, hangings for walls and tubular structures (rather like long lamp shades), made to hang on either side of the deity like colourful pillars, are all made in bold designs in brilliant colours.

In Orissa small pieces of cloth are cut into different patterns and sewn on to a plain background. Birds, fishes, peacocks, elephants, etc. are all made in this way and attached with fine stitches to the base material. Wings, eyes and other details are outlined in chain stitch. Spikes or projections are made by pulling one chain stitch upwards and fixing it in place with a long stitch. Bands of material in different colours divide the space. In an umbrella, the central motifs both above and below will be lotus flowers. The petals are in turn enclosed within a circle of material from which more petals unfold. Space is left between each band and the design encircled by it to allow the background material to show and to avoid a cluttered look. The bands may be plain or have small triangles cut at one end to produce a spiked edge. Sometimes each triangle is cut out separately and is individually attached to one edge of the band.

Flowers are cut out from a piece of material but are also made by taking a long piece of material, shaping it like a flower and then attaching it with fine stitches. Sometimes a coloured material is superimposed over the white one. The coloured flower is smaller than the white one and is arranged in such a way that white shows through a tiny hole in the centre and all around the circumference creating an impression of a double coloured



flower. This gives the pattern depth and creates a three dimensional effect. Bright colours are used alternately with white thus avoiding gaudiness and allowing necessary spaces for the eye to rest upon.

In Tamil Nadu pieces of felt in muted colours are used in combination with strong dark colours to create a powerful effect which is strong and bold but never gaudy. In many pieces the designs are attached to the base material with a fine band of fabric in a contrasting colour. Others are attached with such closely worked buttonhole stitch that it gives an appearance of woven fabric.

The motifs are religious being images of various deities such as Ganesh, Durga, Kartikeya, Shiv and Parvati and of mythological birds and animals. Sometimes the whole motif is cut out of a single piece of cloth but at others different colours are used for body, clothes, wings, etc. These are skilfully joined with fine stitching.

These essentially religious articles have now been modified to produce garden umbrella lamp shades and other articles of domestic use.

### III

## GOLD AND SILVER EMBROIDERY (ZARI WORK)

Gold and silver embroidery is of ancient origin and has been known in India certainly from the 15th century. Where and how it originated is not quite certain but as has been seen earlier, it has been extensively practised in different parts of the world. In the early Middle Ages in Europe, the work was akin to that of the goldsmith and the embroidered surface was often hammered flat. From the 12th century onwards silk thread was used along with the gilt to pick out details such as the flesh of the figures. In earlier references to gold cloth, it is not quite clear whether the indication is towards weaving or embroidery.

In 1498, the Zamorin of Calicut received Vasco da Gama dressed in fine cotton clothes and a silk turban all sumptuously embroidered with gold. The Mughals used gold for filling the background with laid threads while the main motifs were executed in coloured silks. During the decline of the empire the workmen moved to various states which offered patronage. Their skills were adapted to meet the demands of their new patrons and designs were modified to meet the rising costs of both labour and materials.

The love of beauty combined with a desire for display of wealth produced an enormous range of goods that stretched from the sumptuous heaviness of throne seats and elephant trappings to gossamer light fabrics scintillating with thousands of tiny gold dots. In between came scabbards for swords and daggers, canopies, coats, caps, *ghagras*, covers for boxes, combs and mirrors, umbrellas, fans, shoes, bags, belts, saddle cloths and a variety of other objects.



The technique of gold embroidery on velvet is said to have been introduced into India by the Portuguese. Embroidery done on velvet or satin or other heavy materials came to be known as *Zardozi*. The work is done by laying the gold threads over a foundation padding of cotton threads. The work is, of necessity, formal in design. Geometric, floral and animal patterns were great favourites and could appear companionably together on the same piece.

The pieces so produced are obviously heavy being weighed down by the combined weight of the base fabric, the metal wire used for embroidery and the padding. The work was suited for heavy items such as saddle cloths, umbrellas, canopies, seat covers, carpets, bolsters, etc.

The work on lighter fabrics is known as *kalabattu* or *karchob*. There is no foundation padding for the embroidery, the gilt wire or spangles being stitched directly to the fabric or the wire itself used as embroidery thread making tiny dots, flowers or stars to cover light silk, cotton or chiffon. This is used for clothing and small articles of every day.

The design is made on paper, the edges being perforated by small pins or needles to form a stencil. White or coloured chalk is put on a cloth dauber which is lightly rubbed over the perforations transferring the design to the material. White chalk is used for a coloured background and vice versa.

The embroidery threads are made by melting the metal ingot and making them into bars known as *pasa*. For gold thread a piece of silver about the length and thickness of a man's finger is gilded at least three times with the purest gold, all the alloy being previously most carefully removed from the silver. This is beaten into a strong wire and is then drawn through successive holes in a steel plate until it becomes, literally, as fine as a hair. The gilding is not disturbed by this process and the wire appears to be made of pure gold. The wires are then drawn through holes in a steel plate attached to a highly polished anvil. As the wires are pulled through the holes, the workman called *kalabattunakad* strikes them rapidly with a highly polished steel

hammer. So skillfully is the wire manipulated that no portion of it remains unflattened. The wire may then be wound around silk thread or it may be used flat

*Salma* is very fine, soft unflattened wire wound spirally without a thread in the centre. It is very flexible and is used in *Kalabattu* for making flowers and leaves which are attached by tiny stitches to the base material. For use in *zardozi* work, however, the wire is much thicker and the spirals much stiffer. It can be used with close spirals or stretched to make shallower indentations according to the requirement of the design. The flat wire may be twisted at different points to make for variety. A very pretty effect is achieved by using coloured threads for fillings of flowers and leaves while outlining them with gold and silver thread. The effect is that of enamelling from which the work derives its name *mina*.

Small spangles called *sitara* (star), are used for the centre of flowers. Piled together they can make up a whole design. Their name is derived from their capacity for reflecting light and they create the play of light and shade that mirrors or pieces of mica do in other embroideries. Tiny bowls (*katoris*), with a perforation through the centre are also used like *sitaras*.

Flat wire is used for the work known as *kamdani*. The needle is threaded with ordinary thread which is doubled, the two ends being secured together with a knot. One end of the wire is pressed at the knotted end. It is pulled through the material with the wire being pressed down at every stitch. Small dots or sprays of flowers and leaves are produced with overlapping stitches. The effect while being rich is also very light and dainty. A shimmering effect is created by the *hazara buti* in which a thousand dots are produced from roughly 1/80 kg. of wire.

Borders of various kinds are made as edging for sarees, dupattas, etc. or as an adjunct to other embroidery. The *katao-ki-bel* being meant as edging for sarees is 9 yards long. Made of stiff canvas the whole surface of the design is covered with wire and spangles—either plain gold, silver or coloured or a combination of all three. The redundant canvas is cut away



leaving a scalloped or plain edge and holes in the design producing a lacy effect. Being so stiff it is useful only as edging. Other borders are made of cloth on which a design in sequins and wires of various kinds is embroidered. This is then used along with braids, twisted wires, woven gold border, *salma*, *sitara*, *katori*, seed pearls and beetles' wings to make elaborate designs on silk or heavy cotton. Lace made on net is embroidered with gold thread *salma* and *sitara* and makes a nice edging for sleeves and bottoms of *kurtas* or the short ends of *dupattas* as well as for sarees.

A variation is to make the base material with strips or tiny squares of different coloured fabrics and to do the embroidery in wire. Designs cut out from plain gold and silver woven borders are craftily used to enhance the effect. Thus at every join of the stripe a thin border will be attached with large leaves and flowers projecting on both sides. Narrow gold woven borders are converted into *chutki* by being sharply pressed between the two thumbs nails after every centimeter or so along its length. The pressed portion makes a sharp ridge and the whole presents a spiked appearance. This is normally used as an adjunct to another border but is used alone on the field of the work.

A wide range of liturgical vestments are produced in Kerala. Robes, stoles, surplices, cloaks, etc. are heavily embroidered and used during services in churches. Christianity came to Kerala very early and took firm roots there. Inevitably, therefore, embroideries connected with the religion flourished there.

The design is outlined with gold cord secured on the base material with tiny stitches. At the beginning and end of each round the cord is threaded into a needle of appropriate size and passed through to the wrong side. The inside of the design is filled in with spangles. Silk thread is also used over a padding of various degrees of thickness to produce a three-dimensional effect.

The colours in the vestments are fixed. White is the symbol of purity and light; green is hope and is used on certain Sundays such as after Epiphany; rose is for joy and is used at Pentecost

and on martyrs' days.

Gold and silver embroidery uses most of the stitches in other forms of the craft. Satin, chain, stem, running stitches are all used but the most important stitch, of course, is the couching or laid stitch.

Delhi, Bhopal, Lucknow, Agra, Banaras, Hyderabad, Surat, Bombay, Aurangabad, Jaipur, Murshidabad are all important centres of gold and silver embroidery. The work is done mostly by men (in the case of liturgical garments it is done entirely by them) although women do *kamdani* work for which Lucknow is the most famous centre.





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Embroidery, the decoration of cloth with design by needle and thread, is an art dating back to antiquity. Indian embroidery designs are as vivid and varied as the culture of India. Each region and each sect has developed its own embroidery style, technique and pattern over the centuries.

The book apart from briefly tracing the history of this art, enumerates various styles prevalent in different states of India.



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